Stories of Life, Love and

Adventure

15 Cents

MARCH
1916

"PARADISE BEND"
A Gripping Tale of the West by
William Patterson White

"THE SECRET OF *CAPRICE*"
A Complete Novel by
Henry M. Neely

Each One a Headliner!
Robert V. Carr
Thomas Addison
Donald Francis McGrew
Stephen Allen Reynolds
Edward S. Pilsworth
J. Frank Davis
J. Allan Dunn

Francis Miller

From Different Kinds and Various Places

It's easy for an editor to say what he thinks about his own magazine, but people are likely to discount his opinion as that of a prejudiced party. The real point—and people know it—is what do the *readers* think of the magazine? Here is what the readers think of *Adventure*, in so far as a page of space can set it forth:

As I finished my week's work today as a probationer on circuit with the Methodist Church of Canada, I turned to the one magazine of real red-blooded and true adventure which I can still find room for on my study table. . . . In closing let me thank you for a magazine full of life and full of adventure, yet so clean that I can and do recommend it to the boys and young men in my charge, knowing that it will broaden their sympathies with the stranger within our gates, educate them in the customs of the great world without and bring them to a knowledge of the great brotherhood of man. . . . If you wish to use this letter in any way please omit name as it may not be just in accordance with the powers that be, though I am glad to see your magazine on the tables of many of my fellow workers of all denominations and always hear a good word of it.

Have been a reader of *Adventure* for quite a while, and, believe me, she's "some class." Am a cowpuncher by "choice," and it sure is great to take your *Adventure*, get down on your belly in the bunk-house and read and dream, no matter how old it is.—KENNETH E. MOORE, Cheyenne, Wyo.

I address you as a friend because you have been a friend to all who like clean fiction, with a little excitement. I am no adventurer and have never been outside of the U. S. A. or Canada.

I noticed your article in the "Camp-Fire" on back copies. I wish to say that I have a copy of each issue ever printed by you from Vol. I, No. 1, to date, and as you speak of having holders of back copies letting you know when they wish to dispose of their old volumes, I will say that I am not that "hard up" as to sell any of them. Some day when there is no hope of getting any grub otherwise, I may want to sell, but I think I'll go without a sandwich for several days first.—FRANKLIN C. MOYER, Reading, Pa.

Yesterday in the village of Craonne, until lately occupied by the Germans, I came across a copy of *Adventure* for the month of January 1915.— ——— ———, Sous-officier, 2e Regiment Etranger, Bataillon C, Secteur Postal No. 6, France.

I take more pride in that shelf of *Adventure* than I do in my most expensive volumes.—J. T. D. WEIS, Pelham, N. Y.

I have been a reader of *Adventure* for five years and would not give it up for any other magazine printed. I read about twenty magazines each month, but the one for which I wait impatiently, and for which I leave even the clanking job-press, is your *Adventure*—and mine.

As the letterhead indicates, I am one of that great class of rural educators, the country editors.—ED. T. CHILD, Mesita, Colo.

For over thirty years I have succeeded in repressing an innate desire to write a "letter to the editor." I might have suppressed that impulse for a few decades more had you not announced in your last issue that one might obtain indexes to *Adventure* beginning with Vol. IV, and I sure want those indexes. "My only regret," to quote Nathan Hale, is that they don't begin with Vol. I, as I am one of the host who have bought every number of *Adventure* since its first issue, and frequently have occasion to look up some article or story of especial interest in some of the early issues. . . . To my mind the "Camp-Fire" is the most distinctive feature in any magazine.—HAROLD M. HASKELL, Manchester, N. H.

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is already planned out, and you'll be starting on it March 3rd. Here are some of the good things it will bring you, and may you be as lucky in all your other adventures:

"DAYS OF MORGAN"

A good, old-time story of the Spanish Main, full of action—a complete, book-length novel, by George Rothwell Brown.

"OLE LEKKER'S RIDE"

Hugh Fullerton has found some wonderful story material on the shores of our Great Lakes. Here is the first of these new tales.

"THE YEARS BETWEEN"

An Alaskan story with a real punch, by George L. Catton, a new *Adventure* writer.

"LETTERS UP!"

The life-drama of a humble helper in one of the eddies of the great war, by E. Richard Schayer, already famous for his articles from the front.

"THE CROWING HENS OF TOTULU"

J. Allan Dunn gives us one of his humorous yarns of the South Seas.

"DORY-MATES"

Every deep-sea story of Frederick William Wallace's is eagerly welcomed, especially by those who know the sea.

"THE LETTER OF PROMISE"

American soldiers in the Philippines, a tangled coil, and its unraveling, by M. S. Wightman.

"A HOT DOG IN A HURRY"

Any one who can guess from the title what this story is about, deserves as much good luck as the man who wanted the "hot dog."

And these are only part of the April *Adventure's* adventures. For the rest of them, turn to "The Trail Ahead" on the last page of this number in your hands.

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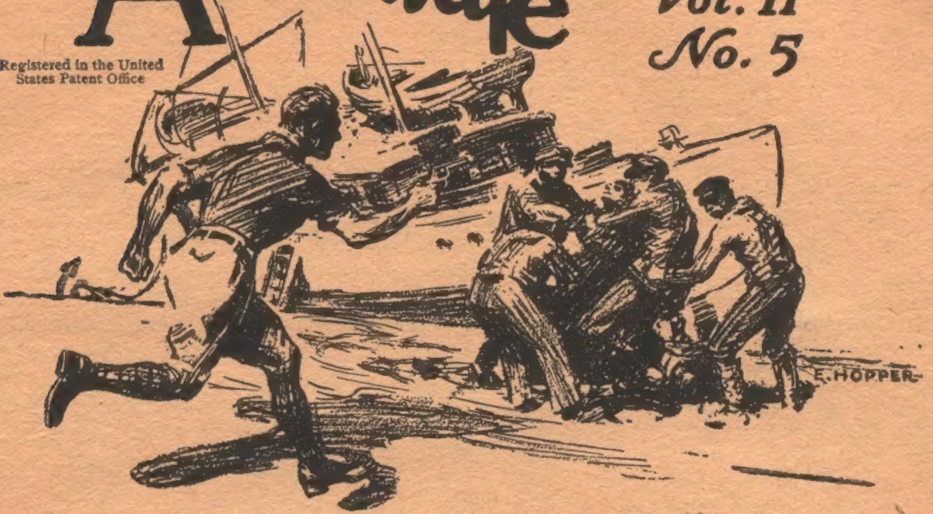

The SECRET OF "Caprice"

A COMPLETE NOVEL by HENRY M. NEELY

CHAPTER I

THE GLEAM IN THE SEA

IN LESS than an hour after the first news arrived, all of the gaiety of the Summer colony at Sea View was hushed. Men met in little knots on the hotel verandas and discussed it in subdued voices, puffing soberly and solemnly at their cigars; matrons and fluffily dressed girls, to whom the presence of the officers of the fleet had been an unexpected blessing in the boredom of the resort's social routine, gathered in the rotundas and corridors and writing-rooms and sobbed openly in their horror at the sudden tragedy.

Only two nights before Lieutenant Armstrong had laughed and chatted and flirted and danced at the ball given in honor of the officers, and jolly little Ensign Holtz, with his big, languid eyes, and his soft, Southern drawl, had made more than one girl dream of the romance in the lot of a navy officer's wife.

And now Lieutenant Armstrong and Ensign Holtz, with their crew of brave men, were gone—horribly, shockingly, tragically gone.

Across the inlet, where the two big aeroplane tents of Ward Fenton were pitched, the news stirred up definite action even before it reached the hotels and cottages. For it was to these tents that it was first taken from the open ocean around the sandy end of Long Point.

At nine o'clock in the morning the high-powered barge of the flagship thundered up the inlet, only her sleek stem showing ahead of the great sheets of spray that she threw out on each side of her as she raced in at full speed. Loungers on the steamer wharf at Sea View heard the reverberation of the huge cylinders, saw the white gleam that came from her tumbling cataracts of foam, and crowded to the bulkheads to await her coming.

But she did not put into Sea View. Instead she made for the float moored off Fenton's aeroplane tents, and a uniformed officer leaped ashore even before the men could get a line fast. The officer hurried up to the first tent, where Fenton's

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mechanician stood watching the performance in astonishment.

"Where is Mr. Fenton?" the navy man demanded.

"In the tent with Mr. Conway," the mechanician answered, and then called, "Oh, Mr. Fenton: gentleman here to see you."

Ward Fenton, aviator, appeared in the open flap.

"Mr. Fenton," said the officer briskly, "I am Lieutenant Stafford. Admiral Olcott has sent me to you. He knew that you have been giving exhibition and passenger flights here, and he wants you to help us immediately in a matter of life and death. How soon can you have one of your machines ready for work?"

Fenton, concealing his curiosity, turned to his mechanician.

"Carl," he asked, "did you fill the tanks of the biplane this morning?"

"Yes, sir."

The aviator again turned to the officer.

"I can start at once," he said. "What is the trouble?"

"The submarine G-8 has sunk," Stafford replied. "She went down in the maneuvers yesterday afternoon, and we have been unable to locate her."

TEN minutes later, as the flagship's barge again thundered down the inlet to Long Point on her way around to rejoin the fleet, Carl Loder, mechanician, wheeled the big biplane flying-boat from the tent while Ward Fenton and Philip Conway, his closest friend, buttoned their flying-clothes closely about their necks, and adjusted life-preservers and goggles, for the task ahead of them.

"But I don't quite see why they should come to you," protested Conway. "What the devil has an aeroplane to do with a sunken submarine?"

"Did you ever see a hawk circling high over the water watching for fish?" asked Fenton.

"Yes, certainly; why?"

"Just as the hawk, from high in the air, can see a fish under water, so an aeroplane can see a submarine submerged a hundred feet," Fenton explained. "That is the main value of aircraft to the modern navy."

"But I thought there were two planes with the fleet," Conway persisted.

"There are," agreed Fenton. "The Admiral has assigned one to hunt to the north of the fleet, another to search about where the maneuvers took place, and he has asked me to fly to the south. Come on; Carl has the machine ready."

They took their seats in the hull, and Fenton started the big Gnome while the mechanician held the machine back, tugging with all of his strength against the pull of the propeller. At a signal from the aviator he released them, and the plane started forward, gathering speed every moment, spreading two great sheets of spray out from its bow as it ran along the surface, and finally lifting clear of the water and climbing on an easy angle, heading first south over the waters of the inlet and then, when Fenton was satisfied that all was working smoothly, cutting east across the stubble-grown sand wastes of Long Point.

By the time they reached the breakers on the ocean side they were a thousand feet high. Conway pointed to the north and shouted above the roar of the motor, "There's the fleet."

"Yes," answered Fenton, "and there is one of the planes circling over it. Get out the 'phones."

Conway reached under his seat and took out the mechanism designed to make conversation easy, in spite of the deafening thunder of the Gnome and the shrieking rush of air as they hurtled through space at eighty miles an hour. They adjusted the apparatus, each having a headpiece with 'phones clamped over the ears, and a transmitter on the chest where the speaker could handily talk into it.

"It's rather good fun," said Conway. "That is—of course, I don't mean exactly fun, because it's a terrible tragedy, and all that—but, as long as it had to happen I'm glad we're in on it. It's quite an adventure."

Fenton looked at his companion and smiled tolerantly, if somewhat disapprovingly. Conway was, as he himself frankly put it, "a butterfly of fortune, born but for a useless day, to sip the sweets from flowers grown by others' labor." He was of the third generation of inherited wealth and blue blood, and even he had not the slightest idea how much money he was worth. All of that, he left to the manager of his family's immense estates.

The two men had met when Conway, always on the lookout for new thrills, had tired of automobile-speeding and, in the early days of aviation, had hit upon the aeroplane as the thing he wanted. He had taken steamer to France, entered one of the flying-schools, and had there met Fenton as a fellow pupil. Fenton was frankly studying the game as a business proposition. He believed in aviation and in the commercial future of aircraft, and he was a serious student of its scientific side.

They had returned to America together, Fenton to engage in exhibitions and manufacturing, and Conway, tiring of flying his own machine, to follow Fenton about the country, enjoying the first real, unaffected friendship his pampered life had ever known, sharing all of Fenton's experiences quite as if he himself were dependent upon their success for his living. Altogether, it gave him a new viewpoint from which to regard the life that had previously so persistently bored him.

His eyes gleamed with suppressed excitement now as they left the long line of breakers behind them, and headed up toward the war-ships.

"Keep looking below," ordered Fenton. "If you see any unusual shadow or light under the surface, tell me at once."

With eyes straining downward as they flew, they circled over the fleet, waved a return greeting to the one waved to them by the naval aviators, and then, following instructions of Lieutenant Stafford, headed south again, several hundred yards farther off shore than they had been on their trip up the coast.

They exchanged scarcely a word, each man bending all of his attention to the task in hand, both feeling the silencing effect of their nearness to this tragedy of the deep. Finally, Conway glanced up at Fenton curiously.

"You're getting pretty far away, aren't you?" he asked.

Fenton nodded.

"About far enough," he answered. "We have come approximately thirty miles below Long Point."

He turned his wheel and they swung back, flying again northward, still farther off shore. Once more they maintained their silence as they flew, each man with his head craned over the side of the hull, his eyes staring downward, somberly, gravely, almost apprehensively, as if he dreaded to be the one to make the discovery they were striving for. In sight of the fleet again they wheeled to the right without a word, and, for the second time, flew southward.

Off the headland where they had turned before, Fenton straightened up in his seat and stretched his cramped legs.

"It's no use," he said. "A trip farther off shore would do no good, for out there the water is so deep that we couldn't see them even if they were there. Lieutenant Stafford said that the probabilities are that they are near the coast. We'll retrace our first course. We haven't yet looked close in south of Long Point, you'll remember."

They swung about and headed northward for the third time. For the first five miles the coast was bare and bleak and forbidding, and was then broken by a deep inlet that opened into a long, irregular inland cove with two branches, each with high, wooded shores. On the southern point of the inlet they saw a tiny dot of a house that they made out to be a coast-guard station, but north of the inlet they found the shore again bare and bleak and forbidding.

Suddenly, as they flew, Conway uttered a shout.

"Quick, Ward; circle back," he called. "There's something there."

His nerves thrilling with the abrupt culmination of their strain, the aviator swung the head of the machine around, and then looked questioningly at his companion. Conway pointed ahead.

"Just about off that dark clump of stuff on shore—trees, they are, I think. Almost dead ahead of us. Something gleamed under the water as we passed. Head off a little more."

Fenton followed directions, and strained his eyes over the side.

"Just about here," Conway said, and almost simultaneously Fenton called, "I see it—there!"

In another minute they had passed over it. The aviator made a short turn, flew a mile or more away nearly east, swung about, and then came back so that they were headed straight for the object beneath the waves.

The two men saw it again at nearly the same instant. It was the gleam of something far under the surface—a long, slim something that caught the morning sunlight and reflected it up to them without definite outlines, but none the less unmistakably.

"It is farther south than Stafford thought probable," Fenton said. "We must go up and notify the fleet at once."

With the big Gnome motor roaring at full speed, they shot northward again, both tense with the knowledge that minutes were precious in this dramatic climax to their day's flight.

But the fleet was not where they had left it. Instead, they could see the ships almost hull down on the horizon still further north, and they pressed on, wondering at the sudden and unexpected change in the Admiral's plans.

Over the flagship they circled, and cut off the motor to volplane down, having no time to notice the activity of the other ships. As they alighted on the water and came to a stop, the barge that had come to their tents that morning ran out to them, and Lieutenant Stafford called a greeting.

"Didn't you understand our signals the first time you flew over?" he asked.

"No," Fenton replied. "Didn't see any signals. What were they?"

"We signaled you to come down," explained Stafford. "The G-8 was located by Ensign Merrick in one of the fleet's machines while I was on the way to your camp. The submarine has been successfully raised, and all of the men taken out alive and well. The Admiral requests that you come to the flagship so that he can personally express his thanks for your prompt and willing assistance."

The two men in the seats of the hydroaeroplane glanced at each other, their eyes showing not so much surprise at this news as perplexity at the significance of what they themselves had discovered down the coast. Philip Conway seemed on the point of blurting out something of this to the naval officer, but a warning look from Fenton silenced him.

"Will you tell the Admiral," the aviator requested politely, "that no thanks are necessary and that, while I appreciate the invitation to visit him aboard his ship, I am already late for several flying engagements at Sea View, and must start back at once? I am most profoundly thankful that you have discovered the submarine in time——"

"Yes," Phil interjected. "Yes, of course, but what the devil——"

"Now, Phil," said Fenton quickly. "You mustn't ask what caused her to sink. That is probably an official secret."

Conway subsided, rebuked by his companion's very palpable misconstruction of what he was really about to ask. The officer bowed, gave a command to the man at the wheel of the barge, and she backed away as the aviator, with a throw of his rear-starter, sent the Gnome into renewed life, and the hydro-aeroplane leaped forward over the water.

Neither man said a word on their swift flight across the miles of open ocean, the gray finger of Long Point, and the calmer waters of the inlet. Once they glanced at each other as though answering some unspoken thought. As their eyes met they smiled, and shook their heads to express their inability to find an explanation for what they had seen. Then again they turned their attention to the vista of land and sea that lay below them.

CARL LODER, clad in rubber boots that came to his waist, was standing hip deep in the water as they alighted, and ran the machine in beside the float. He caught its plane and held it while they climbed out, and then, having moored it safely, joined them in the tent.

"Did you find the submarine, Chief?" he asked, all the ardor of his moving-picture-trained imagination glowing in his eyes.

"The navy men found her," Ward explained. "They hauled her up and took the crew out safe and sound, so you can hurry over to the Imperial Hotel and be the first one to give them the news. It will make you quite a hero with that ladies' maid you have been so thick with since we have been here."

Carl flushed in guilty admission, but shook his head.

"I ain't in no hurry, Chief," he said. "Tell me about it first."

Loder was, as are so many mechanicians in the aviation game, more than a mere hired man to his chief. Traveling, as they did, all about the country together, sharing whole-heartedly their mutual love for the wonderful machines they handled, and the highly perfected motors that drove them, they had become more friendly in their relations than is usually the case in other fields of business, and Carl, a veritable magician with the puzzles of the Gnome and the intricacies of aircraft, had an unerring instinct that kept him from overstepping the line that divided this fellowship from too much familiarity.

"Tell me about it, won't you, Chief?" he persisted.

So Ward Fenton related to him the story of their morning's flight, smiling in tolerant good humor when the mechanician exclaimed in delight at their sighting of the mysterious gleam under the water off the lonely coast to the south.

"But," objected Conway, voicing his thoughts at last, "I can't for the life of me imagine what the —— thing was, can you?"

"No," Ward admitted, "I can not."

"Oh, gee, Chief! I know," cried Carl, his eyes ablaze with his excitement. "I've seen it in the movies lots of times."

"Yes?" questioned his employer in mild sarcasm. "What was it, then?"

"A sunken treasure-ship!" cried Loder. "Spanish gallons or galoons or galleons, or whatever they used to call 'em—you know, with bearded pirates and walking the plank and hanging at the yardarm and all that. And I'll bet there are heavy iron-bound chests in the hold, all stuffed full, and bursting with doubleloons and pieces of eight and —and jewels—and——"

"Oh, hold on, Carl, hold on!" laughed Fenton, holding out a protesting hand. "You quite take my breath away with your mixture of dime novels and moving-pictures."

But Phil Conway, frowning seriously, came to Carl's defense.

"I'm hanged if I don't believe the boy may be more than half right, Ward," he insisted. "She's a ship of some kind, that's certain, and she must be of some value. Tell you what I'll do. I'll make you a sporting proposition."

Fenton looked up at his friend, puzzled. "Well," he said slowly, "what is it?"

"We'll have a wrecking crew go out and haul her ashore," said Conway. "If her value doesn't pay expenses I'll personally make up the deficiency. If it does, we'll share profits, half and half. Come now; what do you say?"

Again Ward looked at him, doubting that he was really serious.

"Do you actually mean it?" he asked.

"Most assuredly."

Ward hesitated.

"It would take some time."

"You intended to lay off for a month when you finished here anyway."

The aviator considered a moment longer, and then, seeing the almost childish delight in the eyes of Carl, held out his hand.

"By Jove, Phil, I'll go you," he said. "You have made me curious, and Carl would be heartbroken not to have a shot at it. But it's to be share and share alike, whether profit or loss."

CHAPTER II

THE SEA YIELDS A RIDDLE

WITH the clearer and saner thoughts that came after a night's sound sleep and a brilliant morning, Fenton found himself regretting the agreement he had made the day before. Carl Loder's fervent tales of sunken treasure-ships now seemed childish in the extreme, and Phil Conway's proposal to take a sporting chance appeared so much drivel.

But it was too late to withdraw. Ward had let himself be carried away by the enthusiasm of his two friends, and had gone too far to retract.

Conway, ardent for immediate action, as he always was when he found something new to engage his attention, had hastily packed a suit-case and hurried off on an early afternoon train the day before to close arrangements with the nearest wrecking company, and to cash a substantial check so that they might have whatever money should prove necessary in their venture.

Conway loved such sporting chances as this. He had a habit of complaining bitterly that the days of romance and adventure were dead, and that there was absolutely nothing for the modern young man to do but the strictly conventional things that gave only mild thrills for the moment until it was time to dress for dinner.

"I want a suit of armor and a sword and shield," he cried once, when particularly bored. "I want a horse and a squire, or whatever it was they used to call their valets in those days. And I want to ride forth and deliver beautiful damsels from the Minotaurs, or—let's see; that's a trifle mixed in its dates, isn't it? But you know what I mean."

And he had hailed this delightedly as just such an opportunity to stumble upon something unusual.

"Of course," he said, "there won't be any beautiful maidens to rescue or any brave deeds to be done unless I tumble overboard and you jump in and pull me out, and that sort of thing's always rather messy. But, by gad, Ward! Suppose Carl is right, and it is an old pirate ship! Why, man dear, nobody that I know has ever pulled up an old pirate ship. That's something, at least. It isn't done ordinarily, and it's the things that *are* done ordinarily that are slowly boring me to an early extinction that threatens to make a tragedy of my fair young life."

And so Ward, even against his better judgment, had yielded. He had written the letters necessary to permit him to disappear for several weeks at least, and had sent Carl over to Sea View to mail them. And then, left alone with his saner thoughts, had come his bitter self-recrimination.

An hour later the mechanician returned and hurried up to the tent, his eyes dancing with an excitement that fairly bubbled over.

"Oh, Chief!" he cried. "We've got it sure. We'll all be rich and famous. It's the *Golden Horn*, and she's so full of treasure everybody wondered how she ever floated anyway. She's——"

"Do you mind," Ward interrupted cuttingly, "do you mind telling me what the devil you are talking about?"

"Why, the ship we're going to pull up out of the ocean. I met an old fisherman today who knows all about her."

"Carl!" exclaimed Fenton. "Do you mean to say that you told him what we are planning?"

"Aw, now, Chief! You know I wouldn't do that. No; I just got talking to him and led the talk around to wrecks on the coast, and from that to treasure-ships. And he said that the *Golden Horn* was wrecked off the coast below here, away 'way back before there was any United States, or any America, or anything. And nobody ever found her. She was loaded to the hilt with a king's ransom or something like that, and——"

"And, of course, you immediately decided it was the *Golden Horn* that we have discovered, and that we have succeeded in raising her, and that we are now all rich. What did you buy with your share—an automobile and a house on Fifth Avenue?"

"Aw, Chief, quit kidding me. I'm just telling you what the fisherman told me, and he ought to know, because he was as old as Methu—Methusel. You know the fellow I mean."

"Yes, I know him well. And I also know that we've got to get to work and crate the monoplane for shipment to New York, and get everything packed to establish camp down the coast. So quit romancing and get into your overalls."

"Gee!" mourned Carl. "Overalls and treasure-ships don't go very well together, do they?"

But, though Ward did succeed in making Carl work with all of his accustomed vigor, he could not stem the constant flow of enthusiastic speculation that bubbled from the mechanician's lips. It was Loder's first opportunity to figure actually and actively in just such scenes as had stirred him in the movies, and in the style of literature that he preferred, and, apparently, he proposed to enjoy it to the limit.

By sunset they had crated the monoplane and bundled up the tent that had housed it, and by noon the next day the machine had been sent to New York, and the two tents, with all of their camping equipment, were aboard an automobile-truck bound down the flat and fairly level beach for an "experimental camp," as Ward explained to the driver to still speculation and gossip at the resort.

Fenton and Loder followed later in the big biplane, flying low, and waving a greeting to the driver of the truck as they passed him on the shore. Then they rose and swerved out to sea, circling a dozen times before Ward finally located the mysterious gleam under the water that had led them upon this quest.

"Gee, Chief," Carl complained when he saw it. "That don't look like what I thought the *Golden Horn* was. Still, she's so far under water you can't tell, can you? Maybe it's her, after all."

They flew back to the shore and came down lower, picking out a spot for the location of their camp, and then flying back to the laboring truck. Here Ward landed Carl to direct the driver, and alone drove the biplane back to the spot that was to be their headquarters.

It took but a short time to unload and dismiss the truck, and erect the biplane's big tent. That done, Ward set about fixing up their living quarters, while Carl built a fireplace and collected the wood for their cooking. In their travels about the country they had become experts at this kind of thing. In many places where they had filled engagements, particularly at county fairs, they had found living in their own camp preferable to the small-town hotels, crowded with the cheap gamblers and concession men and women who follow the fair circuits.

With a restful night's sleep and a substantial breakfast to strengthen him, Ward started north in the biplane to meet Phil at Sea View. He found that worthy waiting for him, bubbling over with the news of the arrangements he had made, and even more enthusiastic than ever over their adventure.

"Been thinking about it every minute, Ward," he exclaimed rapturously. "By gad, it's the greatest thing that ever happened to any one I know—eh? Fancy it, finding pirates and treasures, and all that fort of thing."

"Yes," drawled Ward. "Carl has it all figured out that way, too. He says it's the *Golden Horn*, full of chests of gold and royal jewels. Tell you what I'll do: I'll bet you even money it's an old barge loaded with coal or gravel or something of that sort."

"Oh, Ward! It couldn't be—not after all the trouble I've taken. I've got a wrecking concern who were just sending their men and apparatus to do a job in Cuba. They agree to stop off here, haul this ship up first and go on their way with no questions asked. Isn't that fine? And I wired John Drummond to bring my touring-car down at once, so we can get about in comfort and carry whatever supplies we may need. He ought to get here today—told him to hire a special car for the machine, and hook it onto the first fast train he could catch. So, you see, it can't be a coal barge; it simply can't, after all that."

Ward smiled as tolerantly as he could.

"I think we are all crazy," he said. "Come on; let's get started."

"All right," Phil agreed. "But you've got to fly me off shore so I can see that she's still there. I want to make sure you haven't moved her since I've been away."

Conway refused to say a word during their flight down the coast. He sat erect and tense in his seat, his eyes glistening with suppressed excitement, his whole expression filled with the boyish joy that his imagination had brought to him. He seemed to feel that he was really living at last, really doing something out of the ordinary.

"It's there!" he cried in glee, as he made out the reflected light under the water. "Isn't it great, Ward? There she is, the treasure-ship of our dreams, freighted with romance and adventure and——"

"And coal!" Ward snapped. "Shut up, or you'll have me as crazy as you are."

It was a trying afternoon and night for all of them, for Ward, because of his continued self-reproach; for Phil and Carl because of their enforced idleness on the very threshold of their great emprise. All of the barriers of caste between the millionaire and the mechanician were thrown down during these delicious hours of speculation, and they left Ward much to himself, sitting together on the shore gazing out over the mysterious sea, exchanging cigarettes and embryo scenarios, calling to their memories all of the wild tales they had heard and read of men who had shaken off the shackles of convention and fared forth dauntlessly to face the unknown.

The arrival of Phil's chauffeur, John Drummond, with the automobile, served to break the monotony of this, and then, on the next morning, came the wrecking crews from the city, and the little camp became tense with excitement. Drummond unhesitatingly joined his employer and Carl in foreseeing rich booty, and seemed to regard Ward with something very like pity for his lack of imagination.

IT WAS an easy matter to locate the wreck for the crews. Ward and Phil ascended in the biplane and circled until they found it, and then, when they were directly above, Phil dropped a stone that marked the exact spot for the men watching below.

From then on, the four who watched from the shore regarded the succeeding operations with varying emotions. To Ward, it seemed that he had never seen men work with such certainty and with less waste of effort than did these wreckers. To Phil and Carl and John they seemed to be the clumsiest of bunglers, with no system, and, so far as could be judged, with not the slightest knowledge of the work they had come to do. The man in charge came ashore to them shortly before dusk.

"Wish we c'd always have 'em located f'r us as good as that," he said to Phil, to whom he looked for his instructions. "Think mebbe it w'd be a good thing f'r us t' have one 'f them aireoplanes with our outfits, if they c'n alw'ys locate a ship that easy. We've hooked on to her, sir. What d'you want done with her?"

The three visionaries sprang instantly into renewed life. Carl and John were clamorous to have her hauled ashore at once for examination and appraisal, but, before any orders were given, Phil remembered that Ward had an interest in the business, and so sought him in the tent, followed by the mechanician and the ardent chauffeur.

"Better have her brought right up here on the beach, don't you think so?" Phil suggested.

Ward pondered a moment.

"Well, I'll tell you," he said. "I've been thinking this over pretty seriously. If these men see what she is, they won't keep quiet about it, whether they are in Cuba or at the North Pole. Another thing: if she is up on the beach and a nor'easter settles in, we'll have the devil of a mess doing anything with her."

"Well?" asked Phil, as he paused. "What's the big idea?"

"I'd have them haul her around the inlet below and into the cove behind this land spit," said Ward. "That will have two great advantages: it will make them complete the work in the dark and so will keep them in ignorance of what we have found, and it will leave the wreck up on a sheltered beach where we can work on her regardless of weather."

"By Jove, Ward," Phil exclaimed, "that is a long head you carry about with you, even if you do lack imagination in some things. That's just what we will have them do. What do you say, boys?"

He turned to Carl and John, and Ward smiled in spite of himself to see the perfect footing of equality in council upon which the millionaire placed these two employes. Both nodded their heads in enthusiastic agreement.

"All right," said Phil. "I'll go out and tell the man. And Carl, for Heaven's sake, get dinner ready. I'd completely forgotten that I'm as hungry as a bear."

There were strenuous demurrers from the workmen at this plan of laboring at such a task all night, but Phil was an expert in the art of quietly passing out bribes, and it was not long before the whole crew was smilingly declaring that two nights of such work would be a pleasure for a man like him.

In the darkness that followed dinner, with heavy black clouds threatening rain and totally obscuring moon and stars, it was impossible for any one to make out details of the big hull that, swung half way out of the water, was slowly towed down the coast to the inlet and up the shore of the cove. Before the east showed the first faint streaks of gray she was up on shore and the wrecking crews were back upon their boats to snatch a few hours of needed sleep before setting out for their business farther south.

But for the four men in the big tent there was no such thing as sleep. They threw themselves down on their cots and tried hard to keep their eyes closed, but the hull on the shore kept beckoning to them with unseen hands, and Phil finally kicked his blanket to the ground with an exclamation of impatience.

"What's the use?" he cried in the darkness. "I can hear you fellows tossing about and I know you are not sleeping any more than I am. It will be light enough in another hour. Let's get a cup of good coffee now, and we'll be ready as soon as the sun comes up."

They saw her first in the dim twilight that preceded the dawn. She was long and sleek and graceful of outline, with not the slightest resemblance to the heavy-jowled square-riggers of pirate days, and Carl, voicing the disappointment of the visionaries, said,

"She's not a ship at all; she's a yacht—a blamed fine yacht, but nothing that looks like doubloons or pieces-of-eight or kings' ransoms. It's a shame; that's what I think."

"You'll get no salvage out of her," put in Drummond. "The man that owned her must have had plenty of money, so he could have salvaged her himself if there'd been anything on her worth having. What do you think, Mr. Conway?"

But Phil was out of ear-shot, walking slowly and thoughtfully about the craft, examining her bow and stern in the half light, and apparently puzzled at something. Ward noticed his attitude and joined him.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I'm hanged if I know," answered Conway, in a perplexed tone. "There's something mighty familiar to me in her lines. Seems to me I've been aboard her, but then I know so many fellows who have yachts, and they're building them so much of a pattern in the various sizes, that it's hard to tell just from her outlines. Wish I could make out her name. It appears to be covered with slime or sea-growth of some sort."

They went over her again together, divided between perplexity at the mystery she presented, and admiration for the graceful lines and the evidences of luxury and unlimited expense in building and outfitting. She was a gasoline yacht, of the raised deck and trunk cabin type, with two masts and two little motor tenders still on the davits and lashed fast. Apparently about ninety or a hundred feet over all, she had ample room for an adequate crew, and a large party of guests.

"Oh, Carl, come here," called Ward. "You and John see if you can get some of this slime off so we can make out her name. It will almost certainly be on her stern, with the port she hails from. Get scrubbing-brushes from the tents, and bring lanterns also. Mr. Conway and I will have a look inside while you are at work."

With considerable difficulty they pried loose the hatch that covered the companionway leading below to the dark interior, but the two lanterns and the growing light of dawn dispelled the gloom of the cabins, and they were able to get about in some comfort.

Below decks, the yacht proved even more luxurious than she appeared from the outside. Everything that could make for the comfort of owner and guests had been installed, from a separate electric lighting-plant to a hot-water heating system. In the owner's stateroom aft they found clothes still in wardrobe lockers and dresser, towels, wet and sodden, hanging in the tiny bathroom that led off from it, and every sign that it had been occupied by a wealthy man at the time of the catastrophe.

There was a thin film of sea-slime over the boat, both inside and out.

"She's not in bad shape," said Phil. "This slime is nothing to bother her. I've seen it form in a couple of days on a new boat in these waters. It's algæ, and it grows almost overnight. I doubt, from what's on here, if she's been in the water very long. We can clean the whole thing out in a day or two, and another couple of days of warm sun and air would dry her, even inside the cabins."

"How about her machinery?" asked Ward.

"Oh, this slime doesn't hurt machinery to speak of. Her big engines will probably have to be overhauled, but the tenders could be put in shape in a day. I've known small boats to be sunk in the Chesapeake Bay for a year or more and be none the worse for it. I knew one fisherman down there in Worton's Creek whose boat was so leaky it sank every Monday after he left it. He used to come back the following Saturday afternoon, haul it up, clean it, soak it with oil, and go running off as if nothing had happened."

As he went over her, Conway kept shaking his head in deeper and deeper perplexity, and softly cursing his failure of memory.

"I know her, I'm sure," he said. "I've been aboard her at some time or other during the past ten years, but whether I met her in home waters or simply inspected her while cruising on my own boat, I can't, for the life of me, recollect. I wish——"

He was interrupted by a shout from outside, and the sound of some one scrambling over the side and tumbling down the companionway.

"Oh, Chief!" cried Carl's voice. "Oh, Chief; where are you?"

"Here—all the way aft," called Ward. "What is it?"

Carl came rushing in, almost breathless.

"We've found the name," he said. "She's the *Caprice* of Baltimore."

Phil Conway uttered a gasp of astonishment and horror.

"By gad!" he exclaimed. "I knew I ought to know her. Otto Blaydon's *Caprice*. Of course. I've been on her half a dozen times—some years ago, when father was alive."

"You know the owner then?" asked Ward.

"Used to know him. Great friend of father, he was, but I haven't seen much of him since father's death. By gad, what do you think of that?"

There was silence among the three for several minutes, as though the thought that came to all of them were too solemn for irreverent utterance. Finally, Phil voiced it in a low tone.

"I wonder," he said slowly, "I wonder if dear old Blaydon was aboard when—when the thing happened."

"What puzzles me," said Ward, "is *how*

the thing could have happened. Yachts built like this one do not ordinarily sink, unless they have been in a smash up of some kind, and there is not a broken timber in *Caprice*, so far as we have seen."

"Must have sprung a leak," suggested Phil, but Ward shook his head.

"She is equipped with pumps to handle an ordinary leak," he objected. "Besides, if she had sunk from that cause, there would have been plenty of time to launch the two motor tenders that are up there on the davits. I don't remember seeing any other davits, do you—any for an extra boat that they might have taken, I mean?"

"No," said Phil. "I don't. What the devil do you suppose it means?"

"Motor might have exploded and driven a big hole in her bottom," suggested Carl. "Shall I look in the engine-room?"

"That is scarcely probable," said Ward.

"No," Phil admitted, "but there's a chance of it. Suppose you have a look, Carl."

The mechanician left them, and they proceeded to a further examination of the owner's stateroom.

"By Jove!" cried Phil, down on his hands and knees upon the floor. "Here are his pocketbook and a bunch of letters—washed in here under the dresser. Hold the light closer, will you, Ward?"

They pulled out the things, sodden and heavy from their immersion. None of the writing was legible, the water having destroyed it entirely, but the pocketbook bore, in gold letters, the initials "O. T. B."

"Otto T. Blaydon," mused Phil, looking at the relic ruefully. "Guess there's no doubt of it. Things must have happened suddenly for him to leave these behind. Good Lord, Ward! It can't be possible that——"

The two men looked at each other, the unspoken thought showing plainly in the eyes of each.

"He was rich, I imagine?" asked Ward.

"Good Lord, yes. Had money in all the languages, ancient and modern. His father owned most of South America, I think—nitrate king, they used to call him. Left it all to Otto, and almost disinherited the other son, Stephen. Nobody could ever understand it, because Stephen is an awfully jolly sort of fellow, a real thoroughbred. Everybody simply loves him to death in New York."

"Was Otto married?"

"Yes; years ago. His wife died. He has a stunning daughter, Nellie. It'll be rather rough on her, even if it will make her tremendously rich. She was awfully fond of her father, as I remember it; great pals, they were—went together everywhere. Stephen lived with them in Baltimore, except when he took a little flyer to New York to see the wheels go 'round."

"Was he—listen! Was that Carl calling?"

They kept silent a moment, and heard a muffled voice calling, "Oh, Chief; here! Quick!"

With one impulse they ran from the stateroom through the main cabin and the passageway beyond and into the engine-room. There, by the light of their lanterns, they saw Carl Loder, flat on his face on the floor, reaching in under the engine-bed.

"What is it, Carl?" Ward asked tensely.

"Holes," Carl answered, straightening up and staring at them with wide eyes. "Holes—bored with a brace and bit. The yacht was scuttled."

"Scuttled!"

The word came simultaneously from both men in an exclamation of astonishment and unbelief.

"Scuttled, sure as you're born," asserted the mechanician. "There's been dirty work here. Somebody ought to be strung up at the yard-arm."

The two men flashed each other a look of mutual understanding, and turned to leave the engine-room.

"Very well, Carl," Ward said quietly. "Look around further and report anything else you find."

They went without another word to the owner's state-room, and Phil shut the door after them.

"By gad, Ward," he said. "It's more serious than I thought. Seems to me we'd better keep most of it to ourselves until we find out just where we stand."

"I agree with you," Ward acquiesced. "Carl and John are all right, and they know everything about it now, but the less we tell them of what we learn in the future, the less chance there will be of having the news spread throughout Sea View, and from there to Baltimore and New York. Our first task is, of course, to tell Stephen Blaydon what we have found. What conclusions do you draw from it all?"

Phil shook his head.

"I'm blamed if I know what to think," he said. "It's mighty unpleasant to figure on anything but an accident pure and simple, but it doesn't look to me as if that will explain everything. I'm afraid—I'm really afraid, old chap, it's murder—eh?"

Ward nodded slowly.

"I see no other conclusion to draw," he admitted. "It looks to me as though Otto Blaydon started out with sufficient cash about him to make it worth his crew's while to do away with him. They may have sunk the body, figuring that there was a bare possibility of the yacht being found."

"And so one of us has got to jump to Baltimore and find Stephen Blaydon. He can put detectives on the track of the crew right away. It's blamed hard on Nellie, though. She'll be most awfully broken up about it."

CHAPTER III

OTTO BLAYDON'S DAUGHTER

DURING his long trip from Sea View to Baltimore, Ward Fenton found his task less to his liking with every mile that the train left behind. It had fallen to his lot to tell Stephen Blaydon of the finding of *Caprice*, and of the gruesome clues that seemed to point so unswervingly to a hideous conclusion.

Phil Conway had refused obstinately to be the bearer of the ill tidings.

"I simply couldn't," he had said. "Old friends of the family and all that—it would look so like prying into their private affairs. It's much better to have it come from a stranger like you, Ward—really it is. Besides, I simply won't; that's all."

And to that he had stuck, in spite of all of Ward's persuasive powers. There were times when, in curious contrast to his ordinary good fellowship, Conway acted like a spoiled child, and showed all of the unreasoning pettishness of the pampered scion of wealth. This proved to be one of those rare occasions, and Ward knew the uselessness of trying to alter his decision.

Arrived in Baltimore, the aviator took a taxi at the station, having found the Blaydon address in the telephone directory, and in half an hour he alighted at the big house.

"Is Mr. Stephen Blaydon in?" he asked of the neat maid who opened the door for him.

"No, sir. Mr. Stephen has gone out of town."

Ward frowned in vexation.

"Have you any idea where he has gone?"

"He was to have gone to Washington first, sir; then, I think, he was going to New York."

"I wonder if you could find out for me where I can reach him today? It is really most important."

The maid nodded brightly, and stepped aside for him to enter.

"Yes, sir; I think so. Will you come in?"

He followed her to a drawing-room and waited, admiring the quiet and simple taste with which the big house was furnished, marking a total lack of ostentation, but a keen judgment of the things that were really worth while. He had time for only a cursory inspection of the objects of art that surrounded him before he heard the rustling of skirts on the broad stairway, and turned, expecting to find the maid who had admitted him. Instead, there came through the doorway a girl who fairly took his breath away, not so much because of her beauty as of the perplexing situation in which her unexpected presence placed him. For he knew by instinct that this was Otto Blaydon's daughter.

She came up to him with a litheness of motion that spoke of a body perfectly poised, and of a physical fitness that could come only from a life spent much in the open air. She was dressed in some clinging brown stuff; her hair was brown, with shades almost of black, her eyes were brown, and she herself was dark, with a healthy tinge of red in her cheeks and lips.

"I am Miss Blaydon," she said simply. "You wished to see my Uncle Stephen?"

He faltered a moment under the level gaze of her eyes. Something in her expression spoke of a life of happiness, and he wondered why fortune had chosen him to be the bearer of news that would cloud them with a great sorrow.

"Yes," he said. "The maid tells me he has left town. My business with him is most urgent, and I should like to get in communication with him if it is possible."

She shook her head with a little smile.

"I am afraid it will be impossible for a day or two at least," she said. "Uncle Stephen went from here to Washington on business, and it depended entirely upon the outcome there whether he should go to New York or Chicago. I have not yet heard from him, so I do not really know where he is at present. Perhaps you could leave a message with me?"

He bit his lip in perplexity. Any delay in starting an investigation would, if a crime had indeed been committed, give just so much more time for the guilty men to cover up their tracks.

"I do not know—" he hesitated. "I scarcely know what to do. The urgency of this case is most unusual, and I should really get in touch with Mr. Blaydon immediately."

Again she smiled, a wonderful soft smile that was of the eyes rather than of the lips. "Uncle Stephen has always made a confidante of me in his business as well as his personal matters," she said. "I am sure that I might be able to help you in your difficulty if you would tell me what the business is."

Again Ward faltered. The conviction was forcing itself upon him that, unpleasant as the task would be, he would have to tell this charming girl of the finding of the yacht and of the seeming certainty that her father had met with a tragic end.

"It—it is not really business," he said, striving desperately to find the words he wanted. "It—it is about your—your father."

Instantly, the smile died in her eyes. She seemed to straighten up as though from an electric shock; for a moment he thought there was a flash of hatred in her gaze, and then, by a supreme effort, she regained her former ease.

"Yes?" she asked in a level tone. "Then I think you should certainly tell me. Father entrusted me with many of his affairs before he left for South America."

Ward stared at her in astonishment.

"For South America?" he repeated. "How did he go—that is, I mean, by what line of steamers?"

Again he thought he detected that flash of unfriendliness, but it was gone almost as soon as he sensed it.

"He did not go by steamer," she said. "He went in his yacht *Caprice*. He intended cruising down the West Indies and the Antilles, and so to the coast of South America."

"And did he get there—you have heard from him that he arrived safely?"

Ward was floundering hopelessly under the level gaze from the brown eyes now. They were undoubtedly inimical, as if she resented his speaking of her family affairs.

"Will you sit down?" she asked, in a tone that was a command rather than a polite invitation. "It seems to me that your questions require some explanation. Why, may I ask, are you concerned with father's arrival in South America?"

He took the chair that she indicated, but his overwrought nerves fairly cried out for physical activity. He wanted to be permitted to walk up and down; he wanted most of all to be able to turn his back and rush out of the house, rather than say what he had to say.

"I am concerned," he said, "because I am afraid I am the bearer of news which will be a terrible shock to you. If you have heard from your father—if he has arrived safely—then it will not be so bad. But if you have not, you must be prepared——"

She started to rise from her chair, but sat down again. Her eyes held him powerfully, but there was now no unfriendliness in them, and the calm, level look was gone. Terror was written there plainly. She moistened her lips, and seemed unable to speak for a moment. Then, once more with a supreme effort, she controlled herself.

"I have not heard from father," she said. "I should have heard some time ago, but no letter has arrived. Has something happened to him?"

"I am afraid so," said Ward gently. "At present I can only surmise what it is, but you should get into communication with your Uncle Stephen at once, and have him take charge of everything."

He saw her intertwined fingers grip each other hard, until the blood was driven from them.

"Tell me what it is you surmise," she said. "You need not spare me."

AS KINDLY as he could, he told her. She sat through it all without a move of any kind, save for the continual tense gripping of her intertwined fingers. Nor did she longer gaze at him with that calm steadfastness that he had found so disconcerting at first. Instead, she kept her eyes upon the floor in front of her, the color coming and going in her cheeks, but her lids and the long dark lashes hiding from him the pain that he knew he was causing.

"So you see," he said in conclusion, "that is why I was so anxious to get in touch with your uncle immediately. I think it more than probable—" the idea came to him on the spur of the moment, but he welcomed it—"more than probable that the crew of *Caprice* have taken your father into the mountains down the coast and, in due time, will make a demand upon your uncle for ransom. That would at least assure you that your father is safe."

But she shook her head with an air of conviction.

"It is impossible," she declared. "Father and his friends were all the crew that *Caprice* usually carried. He employed a Daniel Carter as engineer, and two men as cook and deck-hands, but he never carried more than that. He always declared that *Caprice* was the biggest one-man yacht afloat, and that he could handle her by himself if he wanted to. In fact, he has done so on short trips around the Chesapeake."

"But this man Carter—" Ward pressed his theory as the one least likely to distress her—"one never can tell about paid hands when a chance for big money tempts them."

Again she shook her head.

"His father was raised and educated by my grandfather," she said, "and he and his brother were raised and educated by father. Such a thing is out of the question."

"Then," said Ward, "the other two have done this thing, and Carter may also be a victim. I assure you that I do not want to alarm you needlessly, but the evidences we have found aboard *Caprice* seem to me conclusive proof that immediate action by your uncle is imperative."

For a long time she did not answer him, but sat staring at the floor, compelling his unbounded admiration by her display of self-control under such a trying ordeal, where most women would have broken down utterly. But, with her, there was no outward sign of the emotion that he knew must be surging through her, save that constant writhing of her bloodless fingers as they clasped and unclasped each other over her knee. Finally she looked up at him with a suddenness that startled him.

"How many people know about this?" she asked.

"Only four," he replied, wondering at the object of her question.

"You—" she enumerated them—"Mr. Conway, your mechanician, and Mr. Conway's chauffeur. That is right, is it not?"

"Perfectly."

"I remember Mr. Conway. Is it likely that he has told any one about it—any of his friends in New York, I mean?"

"I know that he has not."

"And your mechanician and the chauffeur?"

"I can guarantee both of them."

"And you yourself have said nothing?"

"I came directly here, to tell those who had the first right to know."

Again she paused in deep thought, the red coming and going in her cheeks. At length she seemed to have reached a decision.

"I only wanted to know," she explained, "because I agree with you that nothing should be said that could possibly get to the ears of—of the men who have done this thing, whatever it is. Uncle Stephen should be given a chance to take charge of affairs before another move is made. I shall try his New York address on the chance that he has gone there, and have the message repeated to his Chicago hotel. Will you pardon me a moment?"

She rose and walked into a curtained alcove in one side of the room and he heard her, after a moment, asking for a telephone number.

"I want to send a telegram," she said, evidently to some one at the other end of the wire. "Will you take it? Thank you. Ready? 'To Mr. Stephen Blaydon, Hotel Olchester, New York: Ward Fenton, an aviator, here. Says he and Philip Conway have found *Caprice* sunk off coast below Sea View. Says she was scuttled. No bodies aboard. Wire me what to do.' Sign it 'Nellie,' please, and send the same message to the Grand Union Hotel, Chicago."

She gave the directions for the charging of the message, and returned to him.

"You heard?" she said. "That, I think, is all I can do for the present. It is possible that Uncle Stephen has reached either New York or Chicago, and if he has, I should have an answer in a very short time. I wonder—" she pondered another moment, and again Ward admired her marvelous self-control under such trying circumstances—"I wonder if you would call again this evening, providing, of course, you had intended staying in town."

"I had made no plans," Fenton replied. "I came here entirely upon this business, ready to do whatever circumstances might make advisable."

She smiled brightly up at him.

"You have been most kind," she said. "Then you will come tonight? To see what Uncle Stephen says?"

He bowed, and she held out her hand to him in a sudden gesture of cordiality. As he pressed her slim fingers he felt that they were as cold as ice.

"I will thank you for your consideration later," she said. "Just at present I think I may be pardoned if I do not seem to appreciate it at its full worth."

He bowed and left. He had no thought for taxis or cars as he turned from the house. He wanted physical action; his nerves cried aloud for it. With a stride that made more than one passer-by turn and look at him curiously, he paced the pavements, block after block, not looking nor knowing nor caring where he was going.

His mind was an odd mixture of contradictory impressions. Nellie Blaydon had proved a puzzle to him. He had never looked into eyes that were clearer or more honest than hers and yet, during their interview, there had been moments when they had flashed him an unmistakable sign of something concealed, if not of actual, downright deceit.

He tried to find an explanation of his impressions as he walked. It would be natural, he argued, for a young woman in her position to reserve the facts of her intimate family life from a stranger, coming without credentials, and with such a wild, unsupported story as his. She would, of course, play for time until she could communicate with her uncle or some other relative who could deal with him on a strictly business basis.

And yet even this explanation did not satisfy him. It did not altogether account for her rapid change from terror to calm, from calm to dislike, from dislike to resentment, while behind all of these expressions lay another which he found himself unable to analyze—one which, in the eyes of one less secure from such a suspicion, would have suggested a hidden sense of guilt.

He shook his head at the puzzle and turned to board a car which he knew would take him to a hotel. The night would give him another opportunity to study her. She would, by that time, have got into communication with some one of the family, who would advise her what to do, and he would find her altogether frank and honest with him.

But, when the night came, and he found himself once more face to face with her, that baffling inner expression was still there. She was, outwardly, more cordial and friendly; she came in to him with extended hand, though he noted that her fingers were still cold, and she smiled warmly in response to his greeting.

"I have heard from Uncle Stephen," she said. "My telegram reached him in Chicago. He has wired me to go at once to Sea View to the Imperial Hotel and wait for him there. Can you take me with you tonight?"

"Why, certainly," he replied. "We can telephone by long distance to reserve rooms for you."

"That is a good idea. If you will excuse me, I will have my maid do it at once, and pack my things."

She turned to go, but paused at the door apparently in some confusion.

"There is another matter," she said. "Though I do not like to speak of it, my uncle has instructed me to do so. He says that I am to make whatever financial arrangement you will agree to to induce you to stay in your camp down there, and to see that none of your party leaves it until he arrives. Will you think over your terms while I am up-stairs?"

Without waiting for his answer she turned again and was gone. Ward stood staring after her, again puzzled by the enigma that her personality presented to him. He shook his head over it and then turned his thoughts to the details of their trip. There was no time-table in his pocket. He remembered that he had left it in his room at the hotel.

"I can 'phone the station about the trains," he thought as he recalled Nellie's talk over the instrument.

He pulled aside the curtains that hid the alcove from which she had directed the sending of her telegram that afternoon, and stepped inside. There he stopped short in amazement.

The alcove was bare. There was no telephone instrument in it.

CHAPTER IV

THE CRY IN THE NIGHT

SHIELDED from the glare of a brilliant noonday sun, Ward Fenton sat moodily in the shade of his tent, his frowning eyes gazing down the shore of the cove to where the sleek hull of the yacht *Caprice* rested on the sand. Along her deck strolled Phil Conway and Nellie Blaydon, in earnest conversation. Ward had silently allowed Phil to take charge of the girl as soon as she arrived at their camp.

The young millionaire, apparently repenting of his previous pettishness, that had resulted in Ward's trip to Baltimore, had assumed the burden of pointing out to her the evidences that had led them to the conclusion that her father had been the victim of violence.

Ward had frankly shirked the task. In fact, from the moment of his discovery in the alcove of the Blaydon drawing-room, he had figuratively retired into his shell.

During the long and tiresome trip to Sea View, Nellie had tried hard to draw him out but without success. She had given him every evidence of perfect frankness in her conversation, and had talked in the friendliest of tones, and with all of the resentment gone from her brown eyes but, tempting as her nearness was to him, Fenton could not forget the trick that she had played him, and the proof that it offered of deceit and some deeply conceived plan to keep him from learning her true thoughts.

It brought more strongly than ever to his memory the impression he had gained of her in the afternoon—that, behind all the play of expression in her eyes lay that something that, in any other woman, would have hinted of a guilty conscience.

Yet of what could she be guilty—this young woman who had never known what it was to want for anything? It was absurd to think of her as sharing in any such plot as the discovery of *Caprice* seemed to indicate. It was absurd, and still there remained that ugly fact of her deception in the alcove of her drawing-room.

Ward had had no opportunity to talk with Phil since their arrival at the camp. As soon as greetings had been exchanged, Nellie had asked to be shown over the yacht, and Conway had taken her on board, leaving Ward, gloomy and taciturn, to fight out his mental battle by himself.

But he could reach no conclusion. The whole thing baffled him, particularly the undoubted evidences that this wealthy young woman was, in some mysterious way, concerned in the riddle upon which they had so unexpectedly stumbled; or, at least, was taking a most active part in an attempt to conceal it.

Carl served lunch for them on the after deck of the *Caprice*. The men had rigged up the yacht's awnings, and had cleaned her so that she was in fairly habitable shape, except for the interior dampness that the sun and air were rapidly driving out, and she began to look again like a boat designed and built for the pleasure of a wealthy owner.

To Ward, the meal was an ordeal. Nellie tried several times to draw him into the conversation, but he avoided her eyes, and answered her as shortly as politeness permitted. Phil, too, addressed several questions to him, but, receiving answers in a tone that was far from usual with his friend, looked at him sharply, saw that something was wrong, and desisted, turning his attention thereafter entirely to Nellie Blaydon.

It was a charming picture that the girl made, and Ward caught himself casting furtive glances of admiration at her in spite of himself. Her eyes were softened by a veil of sadness and trouble that made them appealing in their brown beauty, but to Fenton the appeal lost much of its force when he remembered the amazing things he had seen on his visit to her in Baltimore.

But now there appeared to be no deceit in the girl. She was all feminine grace and charm, and talked with a frankness that often comes with a woman in trouble, asking him for help and advice.

"There was a telegram from Uncle Stephen at Sea View," she said. "He suggests that I stay here if the yacht can be made habitable. Do you think it could—today or tomorrow? He will be here just as soon as he can possibly finish the business that took him to Chicago. Then he can decide what it is best to do, but I really think we should leave everything exactly as it is until he arrives."

"Your father's stateroom is in fairly good shape now," Phil answered. "I'm sure we could have everything there snug and comfortable for you by tomorrow."

"Very well, then," she said. "If you will be so good, I will ask you to let John drive me back to Sea View now, and bring me back in the morning. Would that be too much trouble? Or would you men rather be here alone?"

"My dear Miss Blaydon!" cried Phil. "Not to speak of the privilege of helping you, what rights have we here? This is your father's yacht, and it is for you to say what is to be done—eh, Ward?"

"Uh-huh," Ward grunted sullenly, and Phil, with a frown of displeasure at him, turned to the girl again.

"Take John and the car," he said. "They are both entirely at your disposal for as long as you care to use them. We have the aeroplane, if we want to get about."

She flashed him a look of gratitude and, as she rose from the table, cast at Ward a glance that showed not so much displeasure as perplexity at his attitude. But Ward did not care. He merely rose when she did, and, standing by his chair, bowed gravely as she left. He was irritated at himself as well as at her. He was beginning to feel the spell of her personality, and he did not want to yield to its power. He wanted all of his faculties. He wanted to see and think clearly. He did not want to be blinded by prejudice in the developments that he now felt sure would take place before the secret of *Caprice* was unraveled.

He filled his pipe and sat down to a second cup of coffee and to his thoughts, as Phil and Nellie left the yacht and strolled up to the tents. Carl eyed him curiously, knowing him so intimately that his disturbed frame of mind was perfectly obvious to the devoted mechanician.

"Don't let her get your goat, Chief," Loder said in a kindly tone, and then, seeing Ward look up at him sharply, he added, "All right; I'm shut up."

"You needed some supplies from Sea View, didn't you?" Ward asked.

"Yes, sir; if you want me to fix up the engine in that tender I do."

"Well, go ahead. Tell Mr. Conway I want you to go in the automobile. And please see to it that John Drummond and Carl Loder both keep perfectly quiet about what is going on down here. No gossip among the maids at the hotel—mind that."

"All right, Chief. You know me."

He left the yacht, and, a few minutes later, Ward heard the throb of the automobile motor, the grind of gears, and the diminishing hum as the machine started away. Still he did not move. He knew that Phil would seek him there and demand an explanation of his apparent hostility to Nellie Blaydon. And he could not make up his mind whether to tell everything or not. Finally, however, he decided that perfectly open frankness was the only fair policy under their agreement, and that he must relate everything that had occurred since he had left camp for Baltimore.

Conway strolled down again from the tents but did not immediately come aboard the yacht. Instead, he stood on the beach directly beneath Fenton, his feet wide apart, his hands in his pockets, and a cigarette held loosely in his lips.

"Oh, come on up!" Ward growled.

"Well," Phil said, "if it's really safe, I will. I suppose now that the animal's fed he's less dangerous than he was before. Really, Ward"—his voice dropped its bantering tone—"you can be a beast when you want to. What the devil's the matter between you and Nellie Blaydon? Why, man, dear, you were scarcely decently polite to her. And she's a deuced nice girl, seems to me."

"Yes," Ward admitted, "she is. Only she has managed to place herself in my bad graces without knowing it. Come on up and I'll tell you."

Phil climbed the ladder they had placed against the side of the yacht, and was soon seated beside his chum.

"There!" he said. "Now unload."

"I'll begin right at the beginning," said Ward.

"Yes, do," Phil drawled. "That's where things usually start."

He crossed his legs comfortably and listened without a word as Fenton related the details of his trip. When, however, the aviator began to tell of the impressions he had gained from Nellie Blaydon's eyes, Phil raised an objecting hand.

"Oh, now, Ward, that's hardly fair, you know," he protested. "Your conclusions may do credit to your perspicacity, but, on the other hand, they may have come from a disordered digestion. One can never tell about such things. It appeared to me she was an uncommonly frank and open-hearted girl."

"All right," agreed Ward grimly. "I'll

drop the conclusions then and get on with the facts."

And he related how the girl had ostentatiously gone to the alcove in the drawing-room to telephone a message to her uncle, and how he, later, had discovered that there was no telephone there.

Phil stared at him open-mouthed.

"Hoaxed you!" he ejaculated. "By Jove! Who'd have thought it of her! Such a stunning-looking girl, too—eh?"

"Very," Ward agreed. "Too stunning-looking to be safe—if she is mixed up in anything crooked."

Phil pondered in silence for a long time. Then, apparently having solved his mental problem, he rose.

"Do you know, Ward," he said, "I'm beginning to think maybe we have let our imaginations run away with us in this thing? Of course, on the face of it, I'll admit it all looks queer enough. But, my dear boy, to suppose that a girl like Nellie Blaydon is mixed up in anything crooked is simply preposterous — really it is, simply preposterous."

"Exactly," said Ward pointedly. "You prove what I said; she is too stunning to be safe if she *is* mixed up. She has you completely disarmed already."

Phil flushed but shook his head decidedly.

"You're all wrong there, old chap," he denied. "Away off, in fact. I'm mighty strongly attracted by the girl, I'll admit, but she hasn't warped my good judgment yet and, what's more, she's not going to. No; I'm simply convinced by all the circumstances in the case that we have made a mistake—a very natural and justifiable one, mind you, but still a mistake."

"I suppose *Caprice* just naturally sank without cause and that Otto Blaydon is playing pinochle at his club in Buenos Ayres, or wherever it was he started for—is that your idea?"

"No—no; not exactly. Fact is, I don't quite know what my idea is but I'm sure there's been nothing crooked to involve the Blaydons. You wait until old Stephen gets down here and you'll find that everything is all right."

"But why doesn't he come down? Why isn't he here by this time? Why didn't he drop everything and hurry to Sea View instead of sending Nellie?"

"Oh—" Phil waved an indefinite hand—"business of considerable importance, I suppose."

Ward snorted in disgust.

"It must have been important," he growled, "to keep him from the place where it has just been discovered that his own brother has been murdered."

"Oh, not murdered, Ward!"

Ward swung upon him in irritation.

"No?" he demanded. "Well, what, then?"

Phil shook his head helplessly.

"I'm —— if I know," he admitted.

"Neither do I," Fenton snapped. "Come on below. We'll have our hands full getting that stateroom ready for Miss Nellie if we loaf here any longer."

They did not again resume the discussion during their afternoon of hard work on the yacht. Each man felt that he had somehow grown farther away from the other in their dispute on the after deck and that any further attempt to reconcile their opposite viewpoints would result only in straining their friendship to the breaking-point.

Ward was angry, more at himself than at any one else. He knew that he had not acted as well as Phil might have expected of him and, in spite of all that he had seen, he still felt deep down in his heart that Conway was right and that it was preposterous to connect this girl with crooked work of any kind. Yet the fact remained that she had deceived him in a way that showed both cunning and careful planning.

They spoke carefully of generalities during the supper that Ward prepared over the camp-fire in front of the tent, and sat smoking almost in silence afterward, watching the sun sink over the trees to the west. Finally Ward rose and stretched himself.

"Think I'll go in the tent and write some letters," he said. "When Stephen Blaydon gets here, the polite thing for us to do will be to leave them to themselves, so I might as well have my people in New York get busy on the monoplane. Coming in?"

"Don't think I will just now," Phil answered. "Believe I'll take a stroll along the beach and look the yacht over again."

Ward nodded and went inside, lighting the lanterns and hanging them over the folding-table in their living quarters. He heard Conway's footsteps go crunching in the sand toward the shore of the cove and then settled himself with pen and paper to arrange for a resumption of his business in the near future.

But it was hard for him to get his mind off of the more fascinating problems that confronted him there in their camp. He leaned back comfortably in his chair, his hands clasped behind his head, and went over again in memory all of the events which had led up to their present surprising situation.

What puzzled him most, and, at the same time, appealed most strongly to his imagination was the unusual study presented by the charming but baffling personality of Nellie Blaydon. He admitted to himself, alone in his tent, that he had been rather brutal in his attitude toward her since his discovery of her telephone trick and that this brutality was directly due to the fact that, in spite of all, he was conscious that she was attracting him more than he liked to acknowledge.

The spell that her beauty cast was indisputable, but it was not her mere beauty that was the cause of this attraction. It was something underlying it all—some sense that she was helplessly floundering around, trying to find some means of escape from a predicament not at all of her own choosing or making.

He closed his eyes and recalled to memory the varying expressions that he had seen in her brown eyes. There had been a change, he realized, since she had arrived at the yacht. All during luncheon, she had been very palpably a woman laboring under a great weight of distress and, as he now looked back upon it, he sensed the fine exhibition of self-control that she had given under such trying circumstances. She was brave, there was no doubt of that. If, indeed, she were innocent of all wrong, she was truly Spartan in her self-mastery.

The silence of the night crept upon him as he sat there with his eyes closed, and his thoughts wandered. In five minutes, he was dozing in his chair.

Suddenly he awakened and sat bolt upright, listening tensely. Some sound from outside had disturbed him. He heard it again, the faint sound of scraping in the sand along the shore where *Caprice* was hauled out. He smiled easily and reassuringly to himself.

"Only Phil," he muttered, "scrambling down the ladder."

He turned his attention once more to the letters scattered upon the table before him, but again the sound came, this time louder and more definite.

"By gad!" he muttered. "That sounds like a scuffle of some sort. I wonder——"

But, even as he was rising from his chair, he was electrified by a cry from outside—the voice of a man in distress, struggling hard to make himself heard.

"Ward!" it called. "Ward—help!"

Fenton sprang from his chair and rushed out of the tent, with terror spurring him on, brought by the fear that his friend had fallen into the water and the knowledge that Conway was but a poor swimmer. But, almost at the flap of the tent, the aviator stopped short in consternation. From there, he could see down the shore to where the white hull of *Caprice* gleamed in the moonlight.

It was no task in swimming that confronted him there. Almost alongside the yacht, he saw a knot of struggling men—five or six, he judged by his first quick glance, all apparently surrounding and attacking the man in the center, and that man he knew to be Phil Conway.

With a leap, Fenton rushed into the other tent, groped at the head of Carl Loder's cot and found the revolver that the mechanician kept hanging there. Out again he dashed and, heading for the fighting group, fired a shot into the air over their heads.

The effect was even more startling than he had hoped. His thought had been to scatter the men, so that he could shoot with more serious purpose and without the danger of hitting Phil. The attackers scattered with greater speed than he had anticipated. Instead of seeking positions from which to fight back, they turned with one accord and fled around the stern of *Caprice* and disappeared beneath her protection. Before he could reach the yacht, he heard from the other side the roar of a quickly started, high-speed motor, the shouts of command in hoarse voices and then the swish of water as a boat shot out from beyond the hull on shore, swerved sharply down the cove and disappeared around a jutting curve on the shore.

He watched until he could see her no longer; then, without turning to help Phil, stood intently listening as the throb of the motor grew less and less distinct and he knew that the men had not stopped near by to regather their forces and make a fresh attack.

"Lord!" he exclaimed in admiration. "Did you see that boat go? Forty miles an hour, I'll bet."

He turned and found Conway standing beside him with outstretched hand.

"Thanks, old man," said Phil feelingly. "You were just in time. By gad! This does make things look serious!"

"What was it?" asked Ward. "What happened? Tell me about it. What does it mean?"

"One question at a time, please," Conway protested. "I'll tell you first what I think it means. We've both been half right and half wrong about this whole thing. It's quite as serious as we thought it was."

"About *Caprice*, you mean?"

"Yes; and about poor old Otto Blaydon. *Caprice* was scuttled, sure as you're born, and Blaydon either killed or kidnaped for ransom. And this desperate gang are just about ready to murder both of us because we've found them out."

CHAPTER V

WARD CHANGES HIS MIND

WARD stood staring at his friend in the bright light of the moon. Conway's expression showed no signs of the excitement that might have been expected in a man who had just been so violently attacked. He appeared, rather, to be puzzling over the reasons that had led to the appearance of this gang at this isolated camp along the lonely shore.

Phil Conway was a man who had never known physical cowardice. In spite of his having been brought up with every luxury at his command, his very tendency to be bored by everything had driven him to seek excitement in every possible field; and this had resulted in much out-of-door life which had hardened his muscles and his endurance to an extent not usual with men of his class. Therefore he was able to dismiss from his mind all thoughts of the personal danger that might have resulted from such an encounter as he had just had and to concentrate his thoughts immediately upon its bearing on the larger problem that they faced.

"Tell me what happened," said Ward. "How did they get here in that thundering boat without being heard by either of us?"

"They came poling her up the shore," Phil explained. "I was sitting comfortably out there on the afterdeck enjoying a cigarette and my unpleasant thoughts, when I suddenly became conscious of the ripple of the water, different from the wash of the inlet on the shore. I looked up and saw this boat, with a man standing in the stern sheets, poling her along."

"Sneaking up on you?"

"No; apparently not. They came on in openly and, when they were near, one of the men stood up and called, 'Hey, there! Anybody aboard that yacht?' I got up and went over to the railing and answered them.

" 'What's the matter?' I asked.

" 'I'd like to borrow some tools, if I can,' the man said. 'There's something wrong with this gear; it's so hot we can't touch it.'

" 'Wants taking up a bit, I fancy,' I said. 'That's easy enough with a monkey-wrench. Come aboard. There's probably one in the engine-room here.' "

Ward nodded at the significance of the dialogue.

"Played you just right for their purpose, didn't they?" he asked.

"Oh, most beautifully," Phil agreed pleasantly. "Hoaxed me properly from the very beginning. Still, you must admit, there was no reason why I should have been suspicious of them."

"No; that's true," Ward admitted. "Go ahead."

"Well," Phil resumed. "They poled the boat up the beach and came aboard. By Jove!—" with sudden recollection—"it's funny you didn't hear our voices. We called quite loudly to each other."

"I'm afraid I dozed off a few minutes in the tent," Ward explained.

"Oh, that's it. Well, as I say, they came aboard—three of them. They made no attempt whatever to conceal themselves—acted in the most natural manner imaginable—just went below with me and looked all around when I turned up the lights."

"Ah, yes," said Ward. "Wanted to see that you were alone, eh?"

"Undoubtedly. And they saw most beautifully, too. They found the wrench, and then, as we were about to come up on deck, one of them said, 'This has been a damned fine yacht, hasn't it? There's room for quite a crew for'ard. Got good quarters aft, too, I guess, hasn't she?'

"And I, like a perfect idiot, fell right into the trap.

" 'Oh, yes,' I said. " 'Here's the owner's stateroom.' And with that, I took them all over her until they could see plainly that there wasn't anybody else on board. Stupidity, that's all it was—crass stupidity."

"Still," Ward reassured him, "there apparently was no reason why you shouldn't."

"No. Well, we went up on deck and climbed down the ladder and then one of the men said, 'We don't know much about this gear. Would you mind coming over and seeing what you think the trouble is?'

"Cunning, wasn't it? Getting me on to their boat without the slightest trouble or fuss of any kind."

"You went with them?"

"Of course. I understand gears pretty well and I thought they were simply what they pretended to be—men with mechanical trouble that they did not understand.

"But, fortunately, as I was walking along with the man who seemed to be the leader, I thought I heard one of the men behind us chuckle softly to himself. It seemed to make me see the whole thing in a flash. Just that little chuckle made it all as plain as daylight and there I was, in a pretty quandary—eh?"

"So you yelled for me?"

"No; not at once. I stopped, trying to think just what to do to get them to the tents. I knew if you heard us coming, you would be better prepared to help, and one of us would have a chance to get Carl's revolver.

"But, the moment I stopped, they saw that I understood. The fellow I was walking with turned to the others, said sharply, 'Quick, fellows, get him now,' and made a spring for me.

"He was rather clever about it, too. His leap landed him fairly on my back with his left arm tight around my throat and his right hand over my mouth so that I could not utter a sound. But the very force of the attack really defeated its purpose, for it carried me off my feet and I fell sprawling on my hands and knees with him on top of me. So I played the old wrestling trick, bucked like a bronco and he went flying over my head, his arm nearly breaking my neck as the force of the throw tore it loose. It stunned me for the moment and made everything whirl around and I felt too dizzy to rise.

"Then, just as I was recovering my senses and getting to my feet, the other two piled on top and I went down again. One of them managed to get another strangle hold on me to keep me from yelling, I guess, and we went at it for all we were worth. It was really quite exciting for a while.

"The leader yelled, 'Get the gag, Matt!' and I felt a cloth slipped over my face and down to my mouth. I knew that that would end the whole thing, so I gave a final desperate heave, putting the strength of my whole body into it, and managed to shake off the grip around my neck. That's when I yelled for you."

Ward nodded grimly.

"It's a wonder they didn't tap you on the head with the butt of a gun," he said. "That would have silenced you more effectually."

"That's the odd part of the whole affair," Phil replied. "When you fired, they stopped fighting against me at once. One of them turned quickly to the leader and cursed. 'Thought you said there was only one,' he said. 'That's all I thought there was,' the man answered, and then the other man said to the leader, 'Shoot back, Cart; plug him.' But the man Cart said, 'No; I haven't got a gun, and besides, there mustn't be any killing yet.' That seemed to me—why, old chap, what're you looking at me that way for?"

He paused in surprise for Fenton was staring at him open-mouthed.

"You say one of them called the leader 'Cart'?" he demanded.

"Yes; I heard it plainly. Odd, too; never heard such a name before. Now 'Carl' is common enough, but 'Cart'——"

"It's short for Carter," said Ward. "Carter was the chief paid hand on *Caprice*."

It was Phil's turn to stare in astonishment.

"By gad!" he cried. "That simply confirms the conclusions I had drawn from this affair. You're sure Blaydon's man was named Carter?"

"Quite sure. Miss Blaydon and I discussed him as among those possibly connected with the disappearance of her father."

"Did she suspect him?"

"On the contrary. She declared most positively that such a supposition was preposterous. Carter's father, she said, was raised and educated by her grandfather and this Carter, whom her father employed as general factotum on the yacht was, with his brother, a protégé of Otto Blaydon—educated by him and on his pay-roll all their lives. Good Lord, Phil! We've stumbled on the right track here, sure."

Phil lighted a cigarette, his face frowning thoughtfully in the yellow glare of the match.

"There's another thing to consider," he said. "We've not only stumbled on the right track, but we have involved ourselves in the pretty mess by doing it. Looks to me, old man, as if you and I will now become the object of this gang's fond attentions, eh?"

"I see what you mean," replied Ward. "You think we know too much for their safety?"

"Undoubtedly. Somehow they made the mistake of thinking there was only one of us and so they didn't come prepared for any very strenuous resistance. And this fellow, Cart, said there mustn't be any killing 'yet.' I confess I don't like that word 'yet' used that way. It sounds ominous and sort of disturbing to one's restful sleep, you know. 'Yet!' By gad, Ward, we've got to get those fellows or they will get us."

Ward nodded in moody agreement.

"The crew of *Caprice*," he mused. "Carter the ringleader and the other two that Miss Blaydon said the yacht carried. There are several conclusions that we can very naturally draw from this attack. One is that they must have a rendezvous near here somewhere and on the coast. Their use of the boat proves that. And the type of boat they use also proves that they must be plentifully supplied with money. She's a hydroplane, as far as I could see in the moonlight. Seemed to run with her nose 'way out of water and her stern dragged down. And that thundering big engine that sends her along—a speed engine like that costs a pretty penny."

Conway took up the thread of his thought.

"Yes, and from that you can deduce still more. If their scheme has already netted them the money they were after, it looks bad for poor old Otto Blaydon. Looks to me as if he took a heap of cash with him for some purpose and they simply took it and put him out of the way."

"That is my thought exactly. If they were holding him somewhere, intending to demand a big ransom from his brother when the time was ripe, they wouldn't have money to spend on expensive hydroplanes now. And, with that much admitted, our own position becomes rather serious."

"Should say it does. Men who have scuttled a yacht and murdered the owner, aren't going to hesitate to remove the two men who discover their crime. Looks to me as if they intended to take me to their camp, wherever it is, and put me through the third degree of torture to find out how many others know of it. That's why they didn't want any killing 'yet.' Ugh! That 'yet' will haunt me in my dreams tonight, sure as you're born."

Ward smiled.

"You'd better start on a shooting trip to India or go after big game in the Yukon," he suggested.

Phil snorted in disgust.

"And leave you to handle these chaps alone? I'm not quite that yellow, Ward. No; we'll face them together and, by gad! I believe I'm just curious enough to want to tackle them and find out exactly what they have been about."

"But I don't see how we can find out. There's nothing to do but wait around here and be ready for their next move. And, meanwhile, they may take it into their heads to disappear, after all, and leave us alone."

"Do you know what I've been thinking?" Phil asked ponderingly. "I've been thinking that there's only one thing for us to do. We can't leave here and hunt them, very well. I believe I'll run up to New York and put Dick Greiner on the case."

"WHO'S Greiner?"

"Don't know Greiner? But, then, of course you don't. He's a queer chap. Comfortably off and all that. Met him when we were classmates at Harvard. Dick had the oddest hobby imaginable—detecting, if you can call it that. Crazy about the Sherlock Holmes kind of thing, you know. Bring him a mystery to solve and he was your friend for life. We thought it was just a fad of his but, when we left college, hanged if he didn't take it up as a profession. Not an agency or anything like that, you know. He just let it be known among his friends that he was in the game professionally, providing the cases were big enough, and wouldn't involve him in the common police kind of thing. I put him at work just after father's death when the paintings that father had been collecting in Europe was shipped to this country. We found that an excellent copy of a Van Dyck had been substituted for the original. Dick ran it down most remarkably."

Ward considered the suggestion for several minutes.

"What is your idea in the present case? What would you have Greiner do, I mean?"

"Well," explained Phil, "it might seem like butting in to put our own detective on the Blaydon's family affairs, but this night's developments force us to look out for our own safety and involve us in the case in such a way that we've got a perfect right to take care of ourselves the best way we know how.

"There are two things that these fellows may do now. One is to make another attack here. In that case, our best plan is to stay here and meet them and have the —— thing over with. The other thing they may do is to get scared because we have discovered them, and scatter before they are caught. We don't want that to happen because it wouldn't be right to the Blaydons to leave this case up in the air the way it is. That's what I want Dick Greiner to take care of. I want him to get right after those fellows and run them down from the other end."

Ward nodded his agreement.

"I believe you are right," he said. "You'd better go tonight. It isn't likely that they will come back at once because they will naturally suppose that we are alarmed and on the lookout for them."

"But I can't very well. They've got the car up at Sea View, you know."

"I can fly you up there and come back easily enough. And I think it would be as well not to say anything to Miss Nellie about it until her uncle gets here. Let him tell her if he wants to."

"I shall look him up first thing when I get to New York."

"He isn't in New York. You remember that it was Nellie's telegram to Chicago that caught him."

"Oh, true; I'd forgotten. Well, we can't wait to get in touch with him. Dick ought to get on the track of these fellows right away. I could catch the midnight out of Sea View, couldn't I?"

"Easily. We'll get the machine into the water right away."

They walked back in silence through the bright moonlight, up the shore to the tents. Each man appeared to be busy with his own thoughts and the few sentences they spoke had to do only with the details of wheeling the big biplane out and down to the shore where they shoved it into the water.

"Now," said Phil, "I'll throw a few things into a suit-case while you get everything ready and then we'll be off."

When he returned, he placed his suit-case in the hull behind the seats, and then stood thoughtfully looking out across the water.

"Do you know, Ward," he said with some hesitancy, "I believe I can see in this thing an indication that Nellie Blaydon is not involved in anything crooked after all."

Ward nodded slowly.

"Yes," he agreed. "I begin to see things differently, too. I believe I misjudged the girl. It looks to me as though the news I took to her simply confirmed the fears that she and her uncle had already had. I believe they were already investigating the disappearance of her father."

"Exactly," said Conway. "And, naturally enough, as Nellie didn't know you from old Adam, she did everything she could to spar around for time to get in touch with Stephen and still not let you get away from Baltimore."

"She probably was suspicious that I was one of the gang, telling my story simply as an opening to the demand for a big ransom or reward."

"Why not?" Phil shrugged his shoulders expressively. "You bore no credentials and she was all alone with no one to advise her what to do. Seems to me she was mighty clever about it after all."

"I'll have to alter my attitude toward her," Ward laughed. "I'm rather glad of it, too. She's an immensely attractive girl and I didn't want to dislike her one bit. In fact, I was liking her in spite of myself."

"Well, you can take care of her until I return. But don't let your liking get too strong, old chap. There have been a dozen who have tried for her with everything in their favor except Nellie herself."

"Never fear," Ward scoffed easily. "They overlooked me when they passed the romance around in this world. It isn't in my line."

He took his seat in the machine and Phil climbed in after him. A few turns of the rear-starter sent the thunder of their motor re-echoing across the water and among the hills and they hurtled forward in a smother of phosphorescent foam, rising when well down the inlet and climbing to a height that soon merged all the details of earth and sea in one shimmering glow of soft moonlight.

CHAPTER VI

THE CHASE IN THE MOONLIGHT

THEY did not land on the Sea View waterfront. Phil decided that it would be impossible for him to go through the resort and to the station without being seen by some one who knew him, and he did not want the news of his hurried trip to get to Nellie Blaydon until Ward had had a chance to explain it to her in his own way.

A mile or more below the resort, a long indentation known locally as Gildey's Creek ran in a narrow and tortuous channel far inland, its head being near the first station on the railroad line. It was here that they brought the aeroplane down to the water, cutting off their motor while still several thousand feet high and volplaning down in a graceful spiral without a sound that could be heard a quarter of a mile away.

Ward worked the nose of the hydro up to the shore and Phil, taking his suit-case, stepped to the sandy beach.

"Well, old top," he said, "I hate to leave you just at this time, but I really don't think there's a chance in the world of those chaps repeating their call tonight."

Ward laughed easily.

"Never fear," he said. "That shot from Carl's revolver will ring in their memories for some time to come. They'll wait until they think we have forgotten the incident and then swoop down again prepared for war. Unless, of course, they take it as a warning that they have been discovered and scatter to the four winds. Your friend Dick Greiner will prevent that, I hope."

"Quite so. We'll leave all that sort of thing to Dick. I'll be back just as soon as I complete my arrangements with him."

"All right. Shove me off and I'll get started for camp. I'm getting sleepy."

The high banks of the creek reverberated to the thunder of the Gnome as the rear-starter sent it again into action. Ward rose in a shower of foam and climbed in a narrow spiral until his practised ear told him once more that all was working smoothly. Then he glanced below.

The brilliant light of the full moon streamed over the earth and illuminated everything in its soft glow. He could see Phil Conway still standing on the shore, the white gleam on his face showing that he was craning his neck back to watch his friend mounting into the sky. Then the aviator, leveling out, headed east over the waters of Gildey's Creek on his course to the broader expanse of the inlet.

It was delightful flying for a man who so loved the game. The air had settled over the earth in a flat calm and there was not a puff or a cross current to bother him. He sat back comfortably, his hands resting lightly on his wheel, his machine keeping its course with only the slight torque of the propeller to be corrected and that had become so nearly instinctive with long practise that he did it without conscious thought.

He saw the arc-lights of Sea View gleaming up at him from his left as he reached the inlet. He had purposely climbed high so that the thunder of his motor would not reach those on the earth below. His was the only aeroplane within hundreds of miles now that the fleet was gone and he knew that the noise of his engine over the resort so late at night would cause talk and speculation that were certain to reach the ears of Nellie Blaydon. He did not want that. He had not yet made up his mind just how he would explain to her the object of Phil Conway's sudden trip to New York and he wanted time to think it over thoroughly before she should question him.

Over the waters of the inlet, he swung south, following the soft glow on the waves between the dark shadows of the two shores. Above him, not a cloud was in the sky. The full moon and the myriad stars shone bright and unveiled with a definiteness that made them seem closer than the dim and misty earth below. It gave him a curious sense of detachment, as if he were a being in a universe all his own, unconnected either with the crawling humans beneath him or the mysterious stellar systems that gleamed so brilliantly all about.

Far down ahead of him, where the inlet proper made in from the open ocean, the dark masses of the shores were outlined in sharp lines of gleaming white, where the bigger rollers from the heaving sea tumbled in and broke in showers of foam that caught the rays of the moonlight and tossed them up to him in his dizzy aerie three thousand feet above.

He watched them languidly as he flew. His eyes were focused upon nothing in particular, nor was his mind fixed upon the scene below. He was thinking of the other scene of the early evening when he had rushed from his tent in response to Phil Conway's cry for help.

Gradually, however, his thoughts were forced away from his problems to the distant objects upon which his eyes had been bent. Subconsciously, he had become aware that there was something there that did not belong there, that a thin line of white between the white lines of the breakers must be made by some force that was not of nature, not of the night, not of that lonely and forbidding shore.

Abruptly, his attention became fixed solely upon it. It was a sharp thin line; the head of it appeared to be cutting rapidly southward, in the direction of his own flight, while the tail seemed to broaden out and then die away. Even while he was pondering over it, the head swung in a gleaming curve to the east; midway between the two lines of breakers on the inlet it cut straight, ran out for half a mile into the open ocean and then swung south again, following the contour of the coast.

"A speed boat!" he exclaimed under his breath. "By the Lord! A speed boat and making down toward our camp."

He swung his machine sharply about and headed back until his practised eye told him that his distance was correct. He wanted to swoop down in a silent volplane, with motor cut off and, as he mentally measured the angle between him and the boat, he nodded in satisfaction.

Again he swerved, coming about once more into his original course facing the boat and then, shoving his wheel forward, he dived into his best gliding angle and opened his switch.

The silence that followed the stopping of the thundering Gnome seemed to accentuate the shriek of the air as he tore through it, his wires and struts cutting into it at nearly two miles a minute. But he knew that the sound would be unheard by the men in the speeding boat below.

Down to a thousand feet he plunged and then leveled out a moment for a closer inspection of the craft he was following. The roar of the big motor that drove her reassured him. No one aboard her could hear him even with his own Gnome reverberating at full speed. Diving again before losing too much headway, he swung back away from the boat, taking a final look as his swoop carried him into a more favorable position. The lines about his mouth tightened.

"I believe it's the same boat," he muttered. "Going back for another attack on the camp."

His glide had carried him far to the north of the craft he was watching. Once more he closed his switch and, as the motor responded, climbed again in a wide sweep.

Ahead of him he could plainly see the moon on the waters of the inlet that led to the cove into which *Caprice* had been hauled. The thin line of the speed boat's wake was nearing it and he watched intently to see if it would swing in. But he uttered an exclamation of amazement when, instead, he saw it curve still farther off shore as it neared, its course taking it a good mile from the coast.

"Huh!" he grunted. "I see your game, my fine fellows. Getting away off so that we won't hear your motor. Then you'll probably land below and sneak up on us along the shore. All right; I'll stay up here until I see you leave again."

He circled once more so that his speed would not take him ahead of the launch and against the moonlight where his machine would be plainly visible to any of the men who might happen to glance up. Headed south again, he caught the glint of her wake just off the inlet.

"Now you'll swing in," he muttered with a grim smile at this odd game of hide-and-seek. "You'll swing in and land on the point—why, what the——?"

He straightened up in his seat for the craft, instead of swinging in as he had anticipated, passed at full speed beyond the inlet and maintained its southward course following the coast below.

"Well, I'll be ——!" he exclaimed. Then with a sudden realization of what it might mean, he added, "By Jove, I'm in luck. I'll bet those fellows are going to their own camp—the one they fled to after my shot scared them away from ours."

He made another circle as he drew too

near to the boat, and headed still higher. He felt sure now that the men below would make a landing soon and he wanted to run no chances of having his motor heard when the thunder of their own should cease. Coming about again, he saw that the thin wake of the craft was edging inshore and that the boat had apparently slackened its speed.

He peered ahead, looking for some signal light or other evidence of human beings. There was nothing but blackness along the shore. Several miles down, however, he saw that the coast curved inward and then out again and a moment's flying showed him that it was another such inlet as the one into which they had taken the scuttled yacht. He grunted with satisfaction.

"That's your lair, I'll bet my last dollar," he said, as if speaking to the men far below. "All right, my boys. I'll stick to you until I find out all I can. It will help Greiner immensely."

CLOSER and yet closer the white wake on the water edged in until the occupants of the boat could evidently make out the two headlands of the inlet. Then, with renewed speed, it swung in a great curve and headed straight in.

Ward nodded and his eyes gleamed. He was so high now that there was no danger of his Gnome being heard. He could make out none of the details of the scene below but he knew that a fire or a lantern would be plainly visible to him.

He made a rapid survey of the inlet and the cove into which it opened. It was much like their own, with two branches, one curving around the typical long sand-spit on its northern entrance and running up almost parallel with the shore, leaving only a narrow strip of land between it and the ocean; the other running almost straight inland toward the west and then, apparently, sweeping up toward the north.

He grunted approvingly.

"I can land up there," he muttered, "and you'll never hear me."

In another moment, he was once more tense and alert. In the deep shadow of the sand-spit, almost at its point and on its inner edge, he had caught the faint flicker of a red flame. He watched breathlessly. It came again, red and faint and uncertain but definite enough to leave no doubt what it meant.

"Camp-fire!" grunted the aviator. "Just what I thought. Now, swing in and land, you fellows in the boat."

As if in answer to his directions, the wake on the water swung in and cut up the cove. Bringing the camp-fire abeam, it swerved in and then suddenly disappeared.

"Exactly!" Fenton exclaimed. "Cut off your power and now you're floating quietly up to shore."

He shoved into a gliding angle and opened his switch. Silently, save for the air shrieking through his machine, he descended so slowly as almost to stall the aeroplane, but his practised hand kept it safely on the right side of the danger-mark. Floating easily in a wide zigzag, he watched the light below, saw a whiter dot that moved, and muttered:

"Lantern coming out to meet you; of course."

His lips shut in a tight line of determination.

"I'm going to take a chance with you people," he said. "I'm going to land and look you over."

Still volplaning, he headed into a steeper descent and swung away from the camp. The outlines of the cove were perfectly clear to him in the moonlight and he aimed for its upper end, something over a mile north of the fire on shore. Silently he glided down to the surface of the water, taking it with a shower of foam that churned under his blunt bow, and heading inshore as soon as his speed had slackened sufficiently.

A moment's inspection showed him that the beach was smooth and sloping. He worked his way in to it and, leaping ashore, hauled the nose of the machine up the firm sand and made her fast with the lines he had stowed in the hull. A final look about convinced him that she was snug there and that there was little probability of her being seen. Then he turned south and started for the camp below.

It was easy walking for practically the entire distance. The shore was smooth and clear and, had he been on a less serious mission, would have compelled his admiration by its graceful curves in and out, with high, steep banks making up from the beach, thickly wooded and fairly riotous with the pink-and-white flame of the mountain laurel. But he had no eyes for the beauties of nature then; his brows were gathered in a frown and his lips were drawn tight with determination.

After ten minutes of rapid walking, he climbed the bluff of a jutting point and peered through the thick undergrowth on the southern slope. Only a few hundred yards away glowed the camp-fire. It was no longer flickering as it had been when he first saw it. Logs had been thrown on and it was blazing away merrily, with shadowy figures passing back and forth before it.

He crept down again to the shore and rounded the point, keeping under the cover of the bushes that edged the sand. Foot by foot, he wormed his way in, mounted a knoll not fifty feet from the fire and there, dropping flat to the ground, snaked up almost by inches until he was on the knoll's crest, looking down upon the men about the blaze.

There were two tents set up among the trees. His practised eye told him that the camp had been made by men experienced in such things, for the shelters had been pitched with a good eye to drainage and the fire had been made with backlogs, for automatic renewing during the night.

There were two men moving about in the light of the flames as the aviator settled himself for his lonely vigil. One of them moved away, disappearing in the shadows and Fenton heard his footsteps go crunching down the sand of the beach to where he knew the boat had landed. The other man paced up and down, stopping at almost every turn to yawn and stretch himself sleepily as though he had been forced by the coming of the boat to rouse himself from a sound slumber.

The crunching on the sand sounded again, and the dim shadow of the first man came looming up out of the blackness, developing its details of legs, arms and body as it neared the fire. Once more, the sleepy man stretched and yawned, this time so loudly that there was no danger of his not being heard. The man who had been to the beach looked up quickly and then laughed, with a note of amused good-nature that surprised Ward.

"For Heaven's sake, Matt," he said, "if you're that sleepy, turn in again. I'll take care of things."

"Your very kind invitation is hereby accepted," Matt replied, and without more adieu he bolted into the far tent and the falling flap hid him from view.

The man who remained drew a pipe from his pocket, filled and lighted it with deliberation and, hauling a log up close to the flames, sat down with his back to Fenton. But Fenton had already thrilled with the big measure of success he had won. "Matt" was the name of the man who so needed sleep. "Matt" was the name of the man who had been ordered to gag Phil Conway during the fight on the beach earlier in the evening.

Ward's desire to get a good look at the face of the man at the fire was almost irresistible. If the man, Matt, had so quietly and naturally taken his orders from this lone watcher, it was reasonable to suppose that the watcher himself was in command of the camp, and the inference followed that he was Carter. And Carter was the pivot about whom all of this puzzling mystery had come to revolve.

With every nerve tense, Fenton began squirming backward, away from the underbrush that edged the bluff, and, by the most careful kind of work, managed to regain the beach on the other side without a sound. Here he again rose to his feet and skirted the outer side of the bluff, coming once more into view of the camp-fire, but from the other side, nearer to where the speeding boat had run ashore and in a direction from which the lone watcher's face would show in profile at a closer range. But the lapping of the ripples on the shore reminded Ward of the deductions he had made from the expense of the craft these men were using and he determined to verify them if possible.

The sand was smooth and firm and clean all along the shore. It was an easy matter to creep noiselessly down until the deep shadows hid him completely and then along the line of the white ripples. He edged up almost to the rim of a beam of firelight that came from among the bushes, and then stopped for his inspection.

A little grunt of surprise escaped him as his eyes became accustomed to the half-light. In the place of the one boat he had expected to find, there were two. One of them was moored some ten feet off the shore, with bow and stern lines out and a tarpaulin cover protecting its engine from possible showers. The other was nose-up on the beach, a line from its stem running up the shore to where it was made fast about a log.

Both boats were of a type to confirm

every suspicion that these men were plentifully supplied with money. Without being able to examine their interiors, Fenton was sufficiently familiar with motor-boat practise to recognize the flaring V of the bows, merging into the flatter lines of the planing bottom. It was expensive construction and it meant engines of tremendous power and high cost.

And then another thought came to him from the night's developments—a thought more serious and menacing and, as its significance flashed upon him, he stopped. These men had not been frightened away by his revolver shot on the shore of the cove above. Instead, they had calmly come back to their own camp and had at once sent one of their number, in this swift speedboat, up to Sea View, probably to learn all he could of them and to arrange for another attack—this time one that would not fail of its object and that might even eliminate that word "yet" that had so impressed itself upon the mind of Phil Conway.

It meant, then, that they must be prepared for action. The cove in which *Caprice* lay beached must be guarded or abandoned altogether and, if not abandoned, they must take such measures as would protect Nellie Blaydon from the violent hands of these ruffians.

The thought of her sent the hot blood rushing through his veins. It eliminated for all time the idea of abandoning *Caprice* and the mystery that surrounded her. The issue must be faced squarely; these men must be met in open conflict and bested. So long as they remained at liberty, Nellie Blaydon was unsafe, and there, in the silence of the night, with the waters of the cove lapping musically on the shore at his feet and the flicker of the camp-fire coming from the deep shadows of the underbrush beside him, he realized that the safety of this girl who had so tricked him meant more to him than the safety of any other woman he had ever known.

He ground his teeth together in anger and shook an impotent fist at the lonely watcher by the camp-fire.

"You lay your dirty hands on that woman," he muttered, "and you'll settle with me, if it takes the rest of my life to find you."

He lowered himself once more to his hands and knees and began creeping carefully inshore, away from the firelight beam and in under the shadows of the brush. He was determined to see the face of this man who had planned such a hideous thing and who had, by the sheer force of his own villainy, taken the leadership of men who were capable of carrying out his commands to the last letter. He wanted to know the face, to fix it in his memory. He wanted to be sure. He wanted to be in a position to seek personal settlement should ill-luck bring Nellie Blaydon into touch with the fiends who were planning the ruining of her life's happiness.

Inch by inch, he neared the fire. Scarcely breathing, he parted the leaves of the last bush and lay flat, staring into the face of the man upon whom he felt all the rage of his nature venting itself.

It was not the brutal face he had expected to see. The mouth was strong and determined and the eyes were thoughtful and morose as they stared into the flickering flames from under a frowning brow. It was such a face as might have commanded success for either good or evil—which might, indeed, have achieved much of commendable worth, had not some kink of fortune warped the man's abilities into this tortuous channel of crime. Ward could almost plot out the career he had followed—clean and right living and promising much of value until this sudden chance to get rich had presented itself. And then, with the same determination and vigor that had probably marked his more commendable past, he had taken hold, had cast aside all sense of the gratitude owing to the family who had so benefited his own, and had laid out and carried through the plot that had brought him at last to the side of the camp-fire on this lonely stretch of seacoast.

Ward clenched his fists and shut his teeth together as he lay watching.

"You'll pay dearly for it, my fine brute," he muttered to himself. "You come within ten feet of Nellie Blaydon and——"

The rumbling of a deep bass voice sounded from the tent farthest from the fire. There was a coarse laugh, the flap was thrown open and two shadows appeared against the lighter hue of the canvas. The man at the fire rose and turned to them, but they did not pause as they passed him. They were too far from the light for Ward to make them out with any detail. He could only see that two figures moved on past the other tent and down to the shore.

The man at the fire shrugged, smiled wanly and sat down again.

A moment later, the deep bass voice boomed out:

"Oh, Carter! Come down here and get this engine started, will you?"

And then, to Fenton's utter amazement, a woman's voice called:

"Never mind, Carter; I am quite accustomed to handling my own engine."

Ward Fenton, lying in the shelter of the low bushes, felt the whole earth whirl about him. The voice was low and rich and vibrant. He had heard it before; it had been ringing in his thoughts ever since that day when he had made his memorable trip to Baltimore.

It was the voice of Nellie Blaydon!

CHAPTER VII

MRS. HERRIOT BUSTLES IN

WARD sat on the after-deck of *Caprice* with gloomy after-breakfast thoughts, reviewing the events of the night before, while he puffed blue clouds of contemplative smoke from his pipe. His whole brain was in a dizzy turmoil. He could find no point at which to rest, no place where he could pause and reason logically to see where he was drifting. The moment his mind seized something tangible to stay his mad mental whirling, the vortex gripped him in another swirl and he was swept helplessly on.

Only one clear fact stood out above it all. He must get away. The discoveries of the night before showed him clearly that he had no further business in the mystery of *Caprice*, and that any idea he might have had of helping Nellie Blaydon in her fancied sorrow and trouble was no longer tenable.

He laughed bitterly at himself as he recalled some of the thoughts that he now acknowledged he had had. They all revolved about the lithe and graceful figure of the girl whose appeal to him had been so strong.

He had never known a woman whose personality had gripped him so powerfully in spite of his determination to regard her with suspicion, at least. His conversations with her had been few and almost purely perfunctory, yet, in all of them, he had been conscious of the spell that seemed to emanate from her in whatever mood he found her.

But now, in the cold logic of what he had seen with his own eyes—of the almost unbelievable fact that she was linked with these men who had scuttled her father's yacht and made a violent attempt to remove the two who had discovered their crime—what was he to conclude? Reason told him that she was one of them. Yet, every time he admitted this, the memory of her rose before him and swayed him to her defense in spite of all.

She could not be guilty of wilful wrong. No matter what the circumstantial evidence against her, his heart rose in revolt at convicting her, and pointed to the look of pathetic helplessness that he had surprised in her eyes several times; at the appealing flash that came and was gone again, but that told of a woman, forced, against her will, to do a thing which she loathed. She was cornered, driven against the wall. She had made her fight and lost and, in some way which he could not know, she was now paying a terrible penalty. He laughed again bitterly as he realized the course that his reasoning was taking.

"All bosh!" he muttered. "The woman's a crook and I'm a sentimental fool."

But even as he knocked the heel from his burnt-out pipe and rose from his seat, her frightened eyes flashed at him in memory once more, and he cursed under his breath at the men who had involved her in such trouble. One of these was Carter, one was——

With the thought of the deep voice that he had heard in the camp down the shore, he sat down again. It was a point that he had overlooked. The man with the deep voice had given orders to Carter. He had called to him to come start the hydroplane's engine. And Carter had risen respectfully from his seat by the fire the moment the other had come from the tent.

Carter was not, then, the leader of the gang. He was only a sub-lieutenant, a man in charge of a detail sent out on special work. The head, the arch-crook who had planned this whole thing, who was bringing sorrow and suffering into the life of Nellie Blaydon, was the man with the deep bass voice.

The hum of a distant motor came to him as he pondered over this new thought. He knew it was Phil's car, bringing Nellie back to him to puzzle him still further. He rose as the machine swung around from behind the tents and stopped.

He saw Carl leap to the ground and help Nellie and her maid, and then, to his surprise, he saw Nellie speak a few words to John Drummond; the chauffeur touched his cap and nodded, turned the machine and started away again in the direction from which he had come.

Nellie looked up and saw Fenton as they turned toward the shore. She nodded with just the suggestion of a bright little smile, but her face looked wan and almost haggard, and the shadows under her eyes told of her sleepless night.

As he looked at her and saw the marks of her suffering, all of his bitterness left him. He forgot the accusations, forgot the evidence that pointed so straight and unmistakably to her, forgot the very things that had made his trip in the moonlight last night so memorable. All that he remembered was the pity of it all, the pathos of this fine young woman, born and bred to the ease and happiness of an ideal life, plunged here into this mystery that seemed to wrap them all so closely about. His heart went out to her. He took off his hat and advanced with his hand outstretched.

She took it with limp and lifeless fingers. The droop to her eyelids was more than pathetic; it savored almost of the tragic. She did not look up at him as he pressed her hand, but kept her eyes averted, and he saw a flush creeping slowly into her wan cheeks.

"You look unwell," he said sympathetically. "I am afraid you had a bad night."

She started suddenly and flashed him a look of terror, but his eyes told her nothing, for he had himself well under control.

"I am very tired," she said. "You are right; I did have a bad night. I slept scarcely an hour; naturally, I am worrying over everything, even though I still do not believe the worst."

"You must keep early hours until the strain is over," he said. "Sleep is the best strengthener."

"Yes," she replied uneasily. "I—I tried hard to sleep last night, but—but I could not."

"No bad news, I trust?"

The flush became deeper. She fumbled in her hand-bag and drew out a telegram.

"You may read it," she said, handing it to him. "It is not really bad news, but it is—is unexpected."

He opened the yellow paper and read the message:

Miss Nellie Blaydon,
Imperial Hotel,
Sea View.
Stephen has told me bad news, but do not believe bad as he thinks. Keep up heart. Coming down to join you at once to help you in your bereavement. Arrive tomorrow 4:30.
Violet Herriot.

Fenton looked up questioningly when he had finished reading. He folded the telegram and handed it back to her.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "You will have some one to cheer you up. Miss Herriot is——"

"It is a Mrs. Herriot," Nellie corrected. "And I am sorry to say that she is not likely to cheer me up in the least. Unfortunately I—I have never been very friendly with her."

He looked puzzled.

"No?" he asked. "Then I should say it is rather presumptuous of Mrs. Herriot butting in this way."

"I shall have to explain it all to you," the girl said, her words still halting and the deep flush still coloring her cheeks. "But first I should like to have you promise me that you will mention it to nobody until—until all this—" she waved a pathetic hand toward *Caprice* and the tents—"all this is over and forgotten. Will you promise?"

"Certainly," he assured her. "But you need not explain anything if it causes you pain. I am perfectly satisfied to remain in ignorance if you desire it."

She frowned in indecision.

"I am afraid I shall have to explain," she said at length. "If I do not, Mrs. Herriot will; and I prefer to have you learn of it in—in any way rather than hers."

She looked toward the shade of the yacht's after-deck.

"Let us go up there," she said. "It will be more comfortable."

He helped her up the ladder and they took their seats under the awning.

"Mrs. Herriot," she said, resuming the conversation as if it had not been interrupted, "was, in some way, engaged to be married to my father."

Ward smiled in spite of himself at the qualifying phrase.

"In some way?" he repeated questioningly. "That sounds as though you meant by some hook or crook."

"I am afraid I should not have put it in just that way," she replied. "However, I shall not bother to correct it."

"Very well," said Ward. "That makes your meaning all the more clear. We will proceed, then, with the understanding that the shrewd Mrs. Herriot managed to get your father to propose marriage to her and that, of course, she promptly accepted him."

"Please—please—" She put out a protesting hand. "Let me tell it in my way. My own blunder was bad enough. But you put it with almost brutal frankness. You must remember that I have already acknowledged that I have never been very friendly with Mrs. Herriot, so that my opinion of her engagement to father should not be accepted as unbiased. Mrs. Herriot may be a most estimable woman."

"I beg your pardon," said Ward, smiling. "I'll try not to interrupt again."

"The engagement was kept as secret as possible," the girl resumed. "I do not know exactly why: I never asked. I believe Mrs. Herriot planned to have the marriage take place as soon as father returned from his trip to South America. Consequently, I assume that she feels as deeply concerned in your discovery of *Caprice* as any of us, and she probably has some right to come down here and take her part in our efforts to solve the mystery. Only—I must admit that she will not cheer me up very much."

"I see. And what of your Uncle Stephen? Have you had any word from him?"

Her startled eyes flashed up at him again. Then she looked away quickly as though fearing that he had seen her perturbation.

"A letter," she said. "Uncle Stephen will be here tonight. I have taken the liberty of asking John Drummond to return to Sea View for him as soon as he gets Mrs. Herriot. I trust you will not mind?"

"Not in the least. I am most heartily glad he is coming."

She hesitated again in embarrassment. It was most evident that she was finding difficulty in her choice of words.

"Father's—engagement," she said finally, "involves so many things that are purely personal—purely family affairs, I mean—that I will ask you to be especially careful not to mention it to any one. You will promise, won't you?"

The brown eyes were turned upon him in a look that was so full of troubled appeal that Ward felt once more the strong influence of her personality. All of his bitter thoughts fled in a moment, utterly routed by the one great fact of her nearness to him—of her nearness not only physically, but in this plea that she was making for his assistance.

"Miss Blaydon," he said, "I will do anything in the world I can to lighten the burden that you are bearing. I do not know what it is, and I do not ask. I only want you to feel sure that you can depend upon me in any way in which I can help."

She turned her eyes to him again, this time with a hint of surprise and interrogation in them, as if she did not quite understand the cause for such a speech from him. Then the eyes softened and dropped.

"Thank you," she said. "You are most kind—and I will remember if I need help."

Again the interrogative look flashed at him, quickly and in frightened indecision, and she rose from her chair.

"If you do not mind," she said, "I think I will go below and lie down for an hour. I am really more tired than I realized."

He rose, too, and stood watching her curiously as she walked along the deck to the hatch that led through the cabin trunk to the quarters below. He was troubled, uneasy. Something in the expression that he had seen in those brown eyes of hers puzzled him. The sorrow and the appeal in them were natural enough under the circumstances. But with this sorrow and appeal, there was undoubted fright—a fright that amounted almost to terror in her first glance at him. Of what should Nellie Blaydon be afraid?

He shook his head in his helplessness to solve the riddle. Again there came to him the conviction that he must go, that he had no further right to force himself into this complicated family affair upon which he had so unexpectedly stumbled. If a terrible crime had been committed, it was no business of his. If not—if, in some way, there were another explanation for what seemed inexplicable on a legitimate basis—then, also, his interference was in bad taste. He would go.

HE CLIMBED down the ladder and walked slowly and thoughtfully over to the tents. He found Carl bustling about inside.

"Carl," he said, "I think we had better begin to get things ready to move."

The mechanician stopped short in his work and looked up at his employer in amazement.

"Move?" he repeated. "You mean go away from here?"

"Yes."

"And leave this—this whole thing just when it is beginning to get interesting?"

"You mean when Miss Blaydon's maid is beginning to get interesting. I watched you helping her out of the car."

Carl flushed scarlet.

"Aw, you're always kidding, Chief," he complained. "I didn't do a thing."

"Nevertheless," Ward insisted, "we are going back north. You can pack everything except the biplane. We will fly that up to Sea View."

"But, Chief," Carl protested, "you're not going before Mr. Conway gets back, are you?"

"By George!" exclaimed Fenton. "I had completely forgotten Mr. Conway. No; you are right. We will wait for him."

He walked out of the tent and sat down alone to consider this aspect of the case. He had totally forgotten Phil and the errand that had taken the young millionaire to New York. Greiner was probably already at work. There might be something which would require immediate action when Phil returned to the camp. It would mean two or three nights more on the lonely shore. And, with the memory of the darkness and the silence that shrouded them there, came also the recollection of that other camp farther down the coast and the men who were waiting there—for what? Would it be another attack? Nellie had joined them there and it must have been a most urgent development of their plans that could induce her to make such a trip alone in a frail speedboat in the dead of night.

Carter and Matt and the man with the deep bass voice—these must be reckoned with as long as the aeroplane tents stood on the shore near the scuttled hull of *Caprice*. Ward went back to Carl.

"Quit work there a minute," he said. "Come over here and sit down. I'm going to tell you something that will delight your dime-novelish soul."

The eyes of the mechanician glistened with supreme delight as Ward told of the cry that he had heard on the shore, of his discovery of the struggling figures, of his shot in the darkness and the flight of the men. It was such a tale as Loder loved, and Fenton smiled in spite of the seriousness of their situation as he watched the color come and go in the mechanician's cheeks.

"Gee, Chief!" Carl cried, "that's great. And now Mr. Conway's gone to New York to bring Mr. Greiner down here?"

"Look here, young fellow!" Ward exclaimed in surprise. "You're uncanny. How did you know that Mr. Conway had left the camp at all?"

Carl flushed with conscious pride.

"I saw that his suit-case was gone," he said; "so I knew he had gone with it. And he has told me all about Mr. Greiner and what a great detective he is. He used to tell me stories about him while we were sitting on the beach waiting for those men to raise the *Golden Horn*. Huh! *Golden Horn!* Well, even if there isn't any treasure or pirates, it looks like bandits or something like that. Gosh! I'll be glad when Mr. Greiner gets here. I always wanted to know a great detective. I've studied and practised it myself a little. That's why I noticed Mr. Conway's suit-case. You can always deduct, if you're careful."

"And deduce, if you're more careful, eh?" Fenton laughed.

"Tell me some more," begged Carl, his eyes still aglow.

Fenton thought a moment and then decided against revealing his flight in the moonlight after the speeding motor-boat.

"There isn't any more," he said.

The mechanician's disappointment was palpable.

"Well," he suggested, "can't you make some up?"

Fenton shrugged in hopeless surrender.

"Carl," he said, "you are simply impossible. Isn't it serious enough without trying to decorate it with imaginative additions?"

"It's fine," Carl cried. "That is, of course it's serious, but it's great, too. And we'll make those fellows bite the dust yet. I'll tell you what we'll have to do, Chief. We'll have to stand watch. That's what they always do—four hours on and eight off—or eight on and four off, I forget which it is."

"All right," Fenton agreed. "You begin your watch now by getting me a bite of lunch."

They worked about the tents in the early afternoon, packing such things as they could, but leaving the things that might be needed if Phil returned with any news that would require further action. Ward was anxious to be away from it all. He preferred to carry the memory of Nellie Blaydon as it now was with him—a beautiful girl, involved much against her will in circumstances that had destroyed her life's happiness. He was afraid that, if he remained long at the camp, he would find further evidence of her active participation in a crime which would forever destroy his kindly feelings toward her.

Late in the afternoon, he heard the purr of John Drummond's car and went out to meet it as it swung up from the beach. Nellie was not on the yacht's deck. He had not seen her since she left him to go to her stateroom to rest.

A woman of generous proportions gazed complacently down at him as he approached the car. She was florid of face and more than ample of girth, and her eyes, in spite of a certain motherliness about them, gazed down with a calm and serene self-confidence that told him that here was a woman quite able to take care of herself.

"You are Mrs. Herriot?" he asked.

She looked him appraisingly over from head to foot.

"Well," she asked guardedly, "what if I am? Who are you?"

He repressed his desire to grin at her bluntness.

"I am Mr. Fenton," he said.

She beamed on him suddenly and warmly.

"Well, I'm sure I'm glad to meet you," she said. "I never heard of you in my life before, but if you're a friend of Nellie Blaydon's, I'm sure I'm pleased to make your acquaintance. Help me down with my grip, will you?"

She heaved herself up out of the seat with herculean effort and stood towering ponderously and perilously above him, feeling for the step.

"If ever I get a machine of my own," she said, "I'll certainly have to get fitted for it first. All the machines I've ever been in are too tight in the hips."

He helped her down as best he could, and she finally stood beside him, flushed and panting with her exertions.

"There!" she said. "If it's a job like that for you to help me out of a car, how do you think I feel after I've carried myself around all day? It's a blessing my husband died before I got so fat. He died loving me, anyway; that's some consolation. Now get my grip and take me to Nellie."

Ward turned first to John Drummond.

"You are going back to Sea View again, aren't you?" he asked as Mrs. Herriot moved away.

"Yes, sir. For Mr. Stephen Blaydon, Miss Nellie said."

"There may possibly be a telegram there for me from Mr. Conway. Ask at the hotel, will you?"

"Yes, sir."

The chauffeur touched his cap and started his car, swinging down to the beach and disappearing behind the low trees. Ward turned and saw that Nellie Blaydon had appeared on the deck of *Caprice*, summoned no doubt by the sound of the motor and the voices. She was leaning languidly on the rail by the ladder, waiting for Mrs. Herriot to join her. But that ample lady was standing with hands on hips, regarding the yacht with evident disfavor.

"Young man," she said as Ward came up, "is that the boat I'm to live on?"

"Yes; that is *Caprice*."

"Well, you'd better lower that small boat on the strings there and get all your men to haul me up in it. I'll never get up that ladder and live to tell the tale."

She waved a beringed hand at the girl on the deck.

"Hello, Nellie dear," she called. "You can introduce Mr. Fenton to me properly after a while, but he's going to be very busy for the next half-hour. Come on, young man, and help me up there. I'm not going to let you run away and leave a poor helpless widow all alone."

By dint of much careful assistance, with pauses on every rung and half-screamed fears that the next would never hold her, they finally managed to achieve the deck. Fenton saw the look of repugnance with which Nellie Blaydon submitted to a fat and effusive embrace, and turned his back so that she would not be embarrassed by his scrutiny. Diplomatically, the girl persuaded Mrs. Herriot to go below and, as the ample form let itself slowly and carefully down through the narrow hatch, Nellie turned to him.

"You will remember my secret, won't you?" she asked.

"Absolutely," he replied. "You need have no fear, for I shall be going away tomorrow or the next day."

She straightened up as though an electric shock had passed through her body. He saw her hands clench and unclench at her sides, and the terror that flashed into her eyes was unmistakable this time, nor did it die away again almost as soon as it appeared. Instead, she stood looking at him with her lids wide, staring in a consternation that seemed to have paralyzed her powers of speech.

"You are—are going—away?" she managed to falter.

He nodded moodily.

"Yes," he said. "For many reasons, it is best."

Suddenly she regained control of herself by a great effort.

"Mr. Fenton," she said, her voice vibrant with some strong emotion, "you said this morning that you would do anything in your power to help me in this predicament. Did you mean that?"

"I did."

"And does it still hold good? Are you still willing to do something that means much—very much to me?"

He gripped himself hard to restrain the blood that rushed riotously through him at the deep feeling in her voice.

"I will do anything——"

Her eyes held his in a long, searching gaze.

"Then stay here," she said. "Stay, no matter what happens, until I tell you that—that I do not need you any longer."

"Then you do need me now?"

She winced as if in pain at the thought that his words called up.

"I need you very, very much," she said. "I can not explain—can not explain my need nor any of the things that you want to ask—but I need you."

He held out his hand and she placed her warm fingers in it in a pressure that thrilled him.

"Very well," he said. "I will stay—and I will ask no questions."

CHAPTER VIII

UNCLE STEPHEN INTERFERES

"I NEED you very, very much."

The words sang triumphantly through Ward's brain as he walked from the yacht back to his tents. His veins were afire with the riotous blood that seethed through them. The thrill of it was still with him, the feel of the pressure of her hand in his, the deep, warm womanliness of the steady brown eyes that had so held him, the vibrant emotion of the voice as she had spoken the wonderful words.

"I need you very, very much."

It was not for him to question the cause of her need nor to inquire into the meaning of her tremulous tones. It was enough that she had asked him to range himself on her side, to stand with her against these enemies of hers whom he did not know, but whose burden upon her he sensed every time he saw the trouble that clouded her eyes.

It was a feeling new to him, this elation of spirit that had come so suddenly with that climacteric sentence that she had spoken. He had known many women in his time, but his had not been a romantic nature and not one of them had ever so moved him as had this one with her few words of personal appeal.

The sight of Carl Loder, working in front of the tent recalled him to the realities of his situation. He pulled himself together with a great effort and cursed himself for a fool.

"Blatant idiot!" he muttered. "Maundering imbecile—to think of a girl like Nellie Blaydon in any such way as that! She'll probably pull out her check-book, pay you and dismiss you when she's through with you."

He watched the mechanician for a few minutes, gave some directions and then wandered away toward the beach. He wanted to be alone to think. He wanted to weigh the possible consequences of this promise that he had made to her. He wanted to analyze himself and her, if he could, and see if, in the cold light of logic, he had done well.

He wished that Phil Conway were there to scoff at him. In some way, he felt that the cold chill of his friend's ridicule would shock him into a more rational and less sentimental view of this new mental condition in which he found himself. He could imagine Phil looking quizzically at him with the corners of his mouth curled in that half-sneering smile that was such a characteristic of the young millionaire.

"But I say, old fellow," Phil would protest, "you really mustn't, you know. It's perfectly absurd and, besides, that's the kind of thing that gets so horribly talked about in the beastly newspapers. It isn't done among nice people, really."

He sat down on the warm sand to battle it out with himself. As bravely as he could, he tried to present the thing before his own mind's eye in all its absurdity. He caricatured it in his thoughts, picturing Nellie Blaydon at that moment, sitting in her stateroom aboard *Caprice*, laughing quietly to herself at the ridiculous ease with which she had thus triumphed over one man whose accidental discoveries threatened to overthrow all of her shrewd plans.

He imagined her once more, in the silence of the night, steering her swift boat down the coast to report to Carter and the man with the deep voice and Matt—and Heaven only knew how many others were in the plot—to report the complete subjugation of one opponent by means which made violence unnecessary and which were more effectual than gags and brass knuckles.

But, for all his conscientious striving, reason and common sense fled before the memory of her deeply troubled eyes, of her earnest voice, of the genuine pressure of her hand in his and the vibrant, "I need you very, very much."

In spite of it all, he would keep his word with her. He would stay. He would remain quietly and uncomplainingly, ready to spring to her defense when she called. And, if the end proved that he had played the fool, he could go away without cause to reproach her, for his eyes were wide open and his warnings against her were ample.

But, if he were to be her ally here, how much of what he knew should he tell Stephen Blaydon? Were uncle and niece working altogether in harmony in the mystery that surrounded the yacht? Did not many of the events of the past week tend to show that the girl had plans of her own and that she was including her uncle in them only to an extent that suited her?

It seemed impossible to conceive of Nellie Blaydon as an arch-conspirator, yet, as he mentally reviewed the evidence that he had discovered, he began to believe that, in some way, she had managed to delay the coming of her uncle to Sea View until she had completed whatever steps were necessary in the dilemma in which she found herself.

He muttered a curse at his inability to reach a sane decision.

"Brain's all gone," he said to himself. "Right or wrong, I'm with her."

He turned to the problem of Stephen Blaydon again, but he had scarcely faced it squarely, before his ears caught the sound of labored breathing and the crunching of the sand near by. He turned to find Mrs. Herriot coming toward him from the tents.

"I'm conscientious, anyhow," she said. "My latest doctor has ordered me to take exercise and now I've done it for the rest of the week. I got down that dinky little ladder all by myself; what do you think of that?"

Ward rose with an involuntary smile at her ruddy face, though inwardly he resented this interruption to his thoughts.

"I should say you are getting along famously," he said. "It must have been quite a job."

"Yes, it was. You see, my architecture is not of the ladder-climbing period. I came down to see that machine that Nellie says you fly, but when I saw you sitting out here, and put two and two together, I made up my mind we wouldn't talk about flying-machines at all. What you need is a good spanking and I only wish I felt better able to give it to you."

He stared at her in blank amazement.

"Really—I'm afraid I don't quite understand."

"Oh, come now. Yes, you do. You understand perfectly well what I mean, and you're thinking right this minute what a garrulous, interfering old woman I am and how you wish I was a man so that you could swear at me. Go ahead and swear, if you like. The late John Herriot was the fluentest swearer you ever heard, but I was raised in a mining-camp so you can't make me scream. Young man, I'm telling you for your own good: you keep your eyes away from Nellie Blaydon."

He felt the hot blood mount flaming to his cheeks. Involuntarily his fists clenched and he had taken a menacing step toward her before he realized that it was a woman talking to him in this astounding way and that he was helpless to retort. But Mrs. Herriot did not flinch. She stood calmly before him, her head nodding sagely and her self-confident eyes gazing at him, not in enmity but with the friendliest expression of motherly good-will.

"Go ahead; say it," she advised. "It'll do you a lot of good to get it out of your system and I won't mind—honest. I used to remind the late John Herriot of lots of his swear words when he got too mad to remember them himself. I was really a most helpful wife in that way."

"You are—you are altogether——"

"Altogether right," she supplemented with an air of finality. "We'll admit it and avoid further argument. Now, admitting that I am right—and I'm glad you do—you must also admit that you're a mighty foolish young man to think seriously of a girl like her. How much money do you make?"

"How much——"

Ward was floundering helplessly. The suddenness and unexpectedness of her style of attack had found him totally unguarded.

"Yes; how much a year do you earn? I don't mean exact figures. I mean do you earn enough to put yourself in the financial class with the Blaydons? But of course you don't."

"Mrs. Herriot," he managed to blurt out, "you are wrong, really. There isn't any——"

"Now—now." Her tone was soothing. "We won't discuss it any more. I just wanted to give you a friendly tip that Nellie Blaydon is too uppish to let her feelings run away with her good judgment."

"You say—" Ward had recovered control of himself during her long speech—"you say that you only came down here on account of Stephen Blaydon?"

"Yes; Stephen and I have been friends for a good many years. He used to know the late John Herriot. They had lots of jamborees together. In fact, they were the best pair of jamboreers you ever saw."

"But I thought—I understood that it was Otto Blaydon who was your friend."

"Well, Otto and I weren't friends, exactly——"

"Of course," Ward interrupted, "I know that you were more than friends. One scarcely uses the word 'friend' in speaking of a woman's fiancé. I supposed it was because of your engagement to Otto Blaydon that you had come down here."

For a brief instant, he fancied he saw in her calm eyes a quick flash of something very like surprise. But it was gone as quickly, and her tone and manner gave no further hint of it.

"Yes," she said, "my engagement to Otto naturally would bring me down here, wouldn't it? I suppose Stephen told you of my engagement?"

"No; I haven't met Stephen Blaydon yet."

"Nellie is the only one of the family you have met?"

"Yes."

"I hope that Nellie does not feel very bitter about my engagement to her father, does she?"

"Why, really, Mrs. Herriot—" his tone was protesting—"we did not discuss it any further. She merely told me of the engagement and that you had planned to be married when her father returned from this trip to South America. That was all."

The merest hint of shrewd wrinkles appeared in the corners of her eyes.

"I see. Well, Nellie, of course, wouldn't have me for a stepmother for anything. And I really don't blame her. Wouldn't I be the devil of a stepmother for a girl like her? You needn't answer if it will embarrass you. I'm glad you admit it without argument. Now, I want to see that flying-machine of yours."

He tried desperately to draw her out further as they went to the tent and inspected the big aeroplane. He talked easily and carefully, explaining everything to her and, every now and then, leading the conversation around to the things that he wanted to know, but she met him at every point with smiling good nature and, almost without knowing how it had been done, he found that he had been led away from the desired point without gaining even a hint of the information that he sought.

SHE left him after half an hour, refusing his offer of assistance up the ladder. He watched her broad back as it disappeared around the tent and then shook his head. He realized that she had been too clever for him.

As he recalled their conversation, he was forced to admit that he had told her the whole story of the finding of *Caprice* and almost everything that had followed, but that she had turned off his own questions with a seeming ingenuousness that, if assumed, proved her to be a past-mistress of the art of verbal fencing.

He had learned absolutely nothing. It had all left him with the conviction that she had not originally known nearly so much as he had supposed she knew, but that, in their apparently careless talk, she had managed to elicit from him exactly the things that she desired to learn.

Where, then, did this Mrs. Herriot stand in the complications that surrounded him? Two things proved that he must not be too friendly with her. First and foremost, Nellie Blaydon disliked her intensely. Therefore, he decided, he must dislike her. Second, she had declared herself a good friend of Stephen Blaydon, and if, as he more than suspected, Nellie and her uncle were not altogether in harmony, this again put her on the side of the enemy.

And why were all these people so hopelessly at odds? Again he shook his head helplessly at his inability to fathom the mystery, and joined Carl at work about the machine.

"The wide party that just escorted you through here is sure some pumper, Chief," said Loder.

Ward made no answer.

"She knows all you do, now," continued the mechanician.

Again Fenton refused to reply. Loder glanced up at his frowning eyes.

"All right," he said, "I'm shut up."

It was not until dusk was gathering among the trees that Ward heard the sound for which he had been listening. The hum of the motor came to him from up the shore, and he stood in front of his tent, waiting and wondering what would be the outcome of the arrival of Stephen Blaydon. The car swung up and stopped.

Stephen Blaydon sat in the rear seat without making a move to dismount. Instead, he fixed his eyes upon Fenton without a nod or a smile or a sign of recognition of any kind.

Fenton stood motionless in front of his tent, his eyes fixed upon those of Stephen Blaydon. He made no move to approach the car, nor did his glance show in any way that he knew who its occupant was.

For a long time, the two men continued this silent appraisal of each other. Under other conditions, the scrutiny might have proved embarrassing, but all sense of time and propriety was lost to them in the earnestness with which they were mentally weighing each other.

Stephen Blaydon was a man of large build. He might have been a giant in strength had his nature been less lethargic; his frame was a structure designed to hold a big weight of brawn, but his life had allowed the brawn to soften, and the lines of strength had become the rounded and inert lines of approaching corpulence. It was a figure almost perfectly proportioned in its earlier days, and its later filling out had made it ideal for the setting off of a well-tailored suit.

Stephen Blaydon was, as a matter of fact, known as one of the best-dressed men in the gayer circles of New York.

The face into which Fenton looked was just becoming jowled with the ease of life. There was a touch of soft flesh under the eyes, a suggestion of a double chin that required the concession of a collar lower and looser than fashion really dictated, a fulness of the cheeks that had not yet begun to bulge, but that bespoke the coming years of amplitude and rotundity.

It was a face from which a hearty laugh should be constantly booming forth — a laugh a trifle loud, perhaps, a trifle boisterous, even verging on that something that is called coarseness, but a laugh, nevertheless, which should be of boundless good-humor because it came from a man who showed no outward sign of anything that should cause ill-humor.

The eyes, too, bore out this impression. They were gray and they twinkled even now as they held Fenton's steadily. There was a laugh behind them in spite of the veil of troubled thought that clouded them, but their gaze at this moment was one of cold and careful calculation, as though Stephen Blaydon had resolutely shoved his laughter far into the background until he had found out what kind of man this was with whom he had to deal.

There was nothing about this member of the Blaydon family to suggest the arch-conspirator. He did not look like a man who had done much evil in his time; he appeared rather to be a man who had not done much of anything, either good or evil.

Fenton sensed all of this as they stared at each other. From the corners of his eyes he saw John Drummond turn in his seat and look curiously at these two who were greeting each other so strangely. The movement of the chauffeur, slight as it was, broke the spell that had held them, and his voice saved them the embarrassment of mutual apologies which would have amounted to mutual confessions of suspicion.

"That is Mr. Fenton, Mr. Blaydon,"

Drummond said as if he felt called upon to step in as truce-maker.

Blaydon moistened his lips with his tongue, and his shoulders rose and fell as if in a silent sigh of relief that the strain was safely over. Fenton, seeing that the outward semblance of amity had been produced, stepped forward, standing by the car ready to shake hands if the other man offered to do so, but Stephen Blaydon, with a nod of recognition toward him, bustled down into the tonneau for his grip and busied himself with the handle of the door before John Drummond could reach it to help him. With both hands thus occupied, he climbed down and dismissed Drummond with a curt nod. Then he turned to Fenton.

"So you are Mr. Fenton, are you?" he asked in a tone that was neither friendly nor unfriendly. "Where is Mr. Conway?"

The question put Ward on his guard at once. It was direct and peremptory, as though Blaydon expected it to be construed as a command to go and fetch Phil to him. Ward did not like the tone; he liked even less the little glint of impatience in the gray eyes.

"Mr. Conway is not here at present," he said shortly.

Blaydon looked up sharply with something very like a start of surprise.

"Not here?" he repeated as though he doubted the truth of the statement. "The chauffeur told me he was."

Ward stiffened at the implication.

"Mr. Conway and I are not in the habit of taking chauffeurs into our confidence," he said with biting incision. "Neither do we consult them about our plans."

The gray eyes that stared at him looked frightened. Evidently Stephen Blaydon saw that he had made a mistake at the very outset.

"Oh, come now," he said in a tone meant to be conciliatory; "don't get huffy about a little thing like that. Why, bless your soul, man, I didn't mean for a moment to doubt your word. I was only surprised because—well, I guess just because I had made up my mind that I would find him here. We're old friends, you know—that is, the families are, and I've bent elbows with him myself over several tables in New York. Good fellow, Phil is. I'm sorry he's not here, but I suppose he'll be back soon, eh?"

It was a tone of well-assumed carelessness and nonchalance and it might have disarmed Ward had not the gray eyes again flashed him that inimical scrutiny.

"I do not know just when he will return," he said. "Let us go into the tent. I presume you would like to find out what we have discovered down here."

"Yes, but—but——"

Under the skin of Blaydon's full cheeks, Fenton saw the little threads of pink veins that would some day be purple and apoplectic. The man was undoubtedly angry at the curtness of the aviator's sentences, yet he was struggling hard to keep himself well in hand and not arouse too much antagonism. It was a struggle for which he had evidently not been well fitted in his life of easy-going good-fellowship.

"Oh, confound it!" he blurted. "You're a queer cuss, aren't you? You seem to get huffy if I just look at you. Don't be so blamed short with me, man. This thing has put me in a devil of a fix and I'll have to depend on you a good deal to help me out."

"I shall be glad to do anything I can," said Ward with bare politeness. "I really did not mean to be short with you. Let us go into the tent and be comfortable."

Blaydon followed him inside, deposited his grip on the ground and took the seat that the aviator indicated by a wave of the hand.

"NOW," said Ward, "I'll tell you just how we discovered *Caprice* and what we have done since. Then, of course, Mr. Conway and I will retire into the background, for, now that you are on the ground, you will naturally take charge of the case."

Blaydon nodded silently. He crossed his knees and listened without comment as Fenton told the story of the flight that had brought about such strange results and gave only a grunt of mild surprise when the narration led up to the discovery of the fact that the yacht had been scuttled.

"And then," Fenton concluded, "I went to Baltimore to find you, but found Miss Blaydon instead. The rest you know."

Blaydon nodded moodily. He seemed deeply troubled by the story, and the natural expression of joviality had disappeared entirely from his face.

"And—and is that all?" he asked.

Ward thought quickly. It would be

better, he decided, to tell of the attack upon their camp, but he would say nothing about his moonlight chase of the speed-boat and the discovery of that other camp farther down the shore. That would inevitably involve Nellie, and he was determined, for the present at least, to say nothing of her until he understood better the relations between uncle and niece.

"No," he replied. "That is all that concerns the immediate finding of the yacht, but something has happened since that brings Phil Conway and me into it in a way that is most unpleasant for both of us."

As simply as he could, he told the story of Phil's cry in the night and of the shot that had put the attackers to rout. He controlled his expression most carefully during the narration, for he did not want Stephen Blaydon to feel the close scrutiny to which he was being subjected.

Blaydon's attitude during this part of the recital showed plainly the fact that he was badly worried.

"—— it all, man!" he ejaculated. "That makes a rotten mess of it, doesn't it? Why, we've got to find these fellows, that's all there is to it. We've got to find them not only for your own safety, but because they undoubtedly are at the bottom of whatever crooked work has been done aboard *Caprice*. Personally, I don't believe my brother has been killed. I'm expecting almost any day now to get the first feelers from them looking to the payment of a big ransom."

"You will pay it, of course?" suggested Fenton.

"Rather than have Otto harmed, yes. But I'll do it in such a way that it will uncover them later, and then I'll go for them. I've already started the ball rolling from the New York end."

"That is what Phil Conway is doing," Ward said. "I did not intend to tell you at first, but as long as you are both working toward the same end, I think you ought to know. Phil has gone to consult a friend of his, Dick Greiner, a detective."

Stephen Blaydon suddenly uncrossed his legs and sat forward in his chair, his eyes fairly burning into Fenton.

"A detective!" he gasped. "Conway gone to consult a detective? What the devil right has Phil Conway to put a nosing detective into my family affairs? Why, man, it's preposterous! I won't have it. I tell you I won't! You must call him back at once. Do you hear? At once! Go send a telegram right away."

Ward rose and stood looking down on him with calm dignity.

"Mr. Blaydon," he said, "you and I will get along better if you do not attempt to give me orders. I am not in your pay."

Blayton gulped, and the pink veins in his cheeks swelled and grew darker. He bit his lips in vexation as he saw again that he had angered the younger man.

"No; of course not—of course not," he hastened to correct himself. "I—I beg your pardon. I'm sorry. But, confound it, man, you can't blame me for being excited with a thing like this plunked down on me without any warning. —— it all! I never handled a ship-scuttling case before in my life. And my own brother—don't get huffy.

"You see how it is. I'm excitable by nature. Because I've never had any real excitement before, I'm likely to talk like a big overgrown kid because this isn't in my line at all. But really, if Conway puts this detective on the case, it will spoil all of the plans I have so carefully laid to get these fellows red-handed. I've got the best men in New York on it now, and they are doing some things that would throw your man away off because they would look queer to any one who doesn't understand. Just leave it to me, won't you?"

Ward hesitated. The man's earnestness was beyond question. Dick Greiner might, as Blaydon seemed to fear, spoil a well-laid plan, and it was only fair to give the family a chance first.

"All right, Mr. Blaydon," Ward said, "I'll wire Phil that you are at work, and that you want him to keep off."

"Yes—" Blaydon's eyes lighted with immense relief. "And ask him to come down here again right away, will you? I'll need you both badly, and I'd appreciate it if you will both stay a while and help me. Will you? Because, you know, you don't learn how to handle a thing like this by leaning your elbows on a table in New York. And that's where I got most of my training."

He rose and held out his hand with a sudden warm smile that seemed to illuminate his whole face.

"I like you, Fenton," he said heartily. "I like you because you wouldn't let me ride over you rough-shod the way I tried to do. I'm a good deal of a spoiled kid, and I've always been allowed to have my own way pretty much, but when I meet a man who won't let me have it and I know he's right—well, my hat's off to him, that's all. And you're one. See you later. I'll go aboard the yacht and join Nellie."

Fenton watched him disappear and then shrugged and smiled a trifle ruefully. He had to admit that he still did not know exactly where to place Stephen Blaydon. Somehow, he liked the man. There was a certain big-boyness about him, a huge contentment with life and living, and now he was squirming uneasily under the lash of his first real trouble and did not know how to escape.

"All right," Ward muttered to himself. "We'll give the overgrown kid a chance. I'll have John wire to Phil."

He walked out of the tent and almost collided with John Drummond, who was about to enter.

"I beg your pardon, sir," said John. "I was just bringing you the telegram that was at Sea View for you. I didn't like to give it to you in front of Mr. Blaydon, because —well, sir, you didn't look like you wanted him to know any more of your business than he has to."

"Quite right, John," Ward said, taking the telegram. "I'm mighty glad you were so careful."

He took the message to the western side, where the afterglow of sunset still made reading possible. It was only a short telegram, but it made him start with a muttered curse and read it again. It said:

> Greiner makes most amazing discoveries. Beware Stephen Blaydon when he comes. PHIL.

CHAPTER IX

BLAYDON GOES FISHING

FENTON stood looking at the paper in his hand with a smile that was more than half sneer. It was not a sneer at Phil Conway nor at Greiner; it was at the whole atmosphere of falsehood and deception with which he was surrounded.

Stephen Blaydon had said that the plans he had already started in New York would look most suspicious if discovered by an outsider. Was that the cause of Phil's warning? Had Conway and Greiner stumbled upon some of these carefully placed lines and not understood that they were intended to trap the men for whom they were all seeking?

He shook his head as he considered the possibility. Phil knew the details of the mystery too well to be easily misled. With a skilled man like Richard Greiner to interpret each bit of evidence in the light of what Phil could tell him, it was not likely that they would go so entirely wrong as to warn him mistakenly against such a man as Stephen Blaydon. There must be something behind it.

He squared his shoulders, and his jaws shut grimly. He had drifted long enough in this thing. He had passively allowed himself to be used by others to suit their own purposes, but now he determined to take a hand himself. He judged from Phil's telegram that the New York end would occupy Conway and Greiner for some days, he himself must keep his eyes and ears wide open, then, here where the prime movers in the mystery were gathered.

This man, Stephen Blaydon, puzzled him. There was something about the man that was vaguely familiar—some fleeting expression, some little movement, something that he knew he ought to recognize, but which escaped him every time he tried to determine what it was. He was sure that he had never met Stephen Blaydon before. Yet, after their short conversation, this impression remained strong with him, that he ought to recognize Blaydon as having in some way entered his life.

He walked over to the fireplace where the embers were still smoking and, raking the ashes away, shoved the telegram into them and stood watching it as it burned. There should be no possibility of Stephen Blaydon knowing that he was being suspected. Then Ward called John Drummond from the tent.

"John," he said. "I'll have to ask you to run back to Sea View and send an answer to Mr. Conway's telegram. You will have to stay at the hotel all night—until a reply to my answer comes, in fact."

"Very well, sir," John said. "I'll get the car at once."

When he had gone, Ward sat down by the fire, scribbled a message on a piece of note-paper and reread it carefully.

> Stephen Blaydon here. Says you must positively call Greiner off at once. Says has started plan to get gang and fears you will spoil it. Wants you here

immediately. Says most urgent. Send me wire to show him saying you will come.

He smiled at the last sentence.

"Phil will understand," he thought. "It really means that I don't care whether he comes or not so long as I have the telegram to show to Uncle Stephen and keep him quiet."

He gave the message to John, and the car disappeared up the beach. Then, hoping that he might get a chance to speak a few words to Nellie Blaydon, he strolled over toward the inlet, peering through the gathering darkness at the white hull of the yacht as she lay on the shore, the beams of her lights gleaming through the windows of her cabin-trunk.

From her after deck, the sound of voices came to him in indistinct murmurs—the rumble of the voice of Stephen Blaydon and the querulous tones of the portly Mrs. Herriot. He listened a few minutes to hear Nellie Blaydon speak, but only the two voices came to him and the light from the girl's stateroom convinced him that she was not with the others.

He turned and went back to his tent. He felt weary and mentally fatigued, and he realized the uselessness of trying to probe further into the mystery until he had new facts upon which to base fresh lines of reasoning. As he passed the aeroplane tent, he glanced in and saw Carl Loder stretched out sound asleep upon his cot.

But sleep was slow in coming to Ward that night. Try as he would, he could not banish from his mind the disquieting impression that he ought to remember Stephen Blaydon, that he ought to be able to say definitely what it was about the man that he had known somewhere before.

He finally closed his eyes to restless dreaming of attacks by bearded pirates, of blood-dripping cutlasses and bandana caps, and all the boyhood paraphernalia of the dime novel. And over it all leered the triumphant face of Stephen Blaydon, while Phil Conway and Dick Greiner wrung their hands in helpless pity in the dim background.

IT WAS late in the morning when he awoke. He roused himself as he smelled the coffee from Carl's fire. Listlessly he bathed and dressed himself and joined the mechanician. Loder greeted him with a beaming smile.

"Good afternoon," said Carl with pointed sarcasm. "You got up almost in time for dinner, didn't you?"

"Is it so late?" Ward asked. "Everybody must have overslept. I haven't heard a sound."

"Everybody else has been up for hours," Loder contradicted. "Mr. Stephen Blaydon got me up before sunrise. Say, Chief, that man sure is some sport."

The cobwebs suddenly fled from Ward's brain. He became alert on the instant.

"Yes?" he asked with assumed disinterestedness. "What has he done to make you think that?"

Carl reached into the pocket of his overalls and drew out a five-dollar bill.

"For breakfast," he said. "Some sport, that."

"Five dollars for breakfast?" Ward queried in surprise. "Why should he pay so much!"

"Well, maybe it wasn't only for breakfast. He came to the tent and woke me up to ask if there was any good fishing around here. I told him we hadn't tried it, and he said it looked like it might be good down the cove near the inlet.

"'I see you've fixed up *Caprice*'s motor tender,' he said, and I said that I'd put it in good shape in case we wanted to use it.

"Then he pulled out his wallet—oh, gee, Chief! You'd ought to see that wallet! Full of 'em, it was—yellow boys and green ones, and all nice and new."

"'I'll make you a business proposition,' he says. 'I've got a lot to think about today, and I can always think better when I'm fishing. I'll give you five dollars to get that tender down, fill her tank, get me some breakfast and start me off. Is it a go?'

"'Kiss your five good-by,' I says—and here it is. It was his tender anyway. It isn't ours, is it?"

"No," Ward agreed. "He has a right to do as he pleases with it. And if he wants to spend the day fishing, that is his business. Now get me my breakfast or I will take that five away from you."

Carl kissed the bill and tucked it back in his pocket.

"Over my dead body, you will," he said, and set to work with the frying-pan.

Ward watched him in silence. He began to see the possible meaning of this early-morning fishing-trip of Blaydon's. The tender from *Caprice* was a sturdy little boat, high sided and staunchly built, her oak frames and cedar planking equal to any sea she was likely to encounter, and her engine possessing a good reserve of power for any emergency. She could stand the trip down the coast to that inlet twenty miles below——

As the thought of the camp down there came to him, there came also in a flash the reason that there was something familiar about Stephen Blaydon. He heard the deep voice again as he had heard it before in the silence of the moonlit night, calling, "Oh, Carter, come down here and get this engine started, will you?"

There could be no doubt about it now. The tones came to him again clearly in memory. Stephen Blaydon was in command of the gang down there. It had been for Stephen Blaydon that the man Carter had risen respectfully from the fire. It was, therefore, to Stephen Blaydon that he and Phil must look for an explanation of that attack in the night when the shot from Carl's revolver had spoiled whatever plans it was that the assailants had had.

As the full significance of all this came to him, Ward recalled as best he could the words in which he had told Stephen Blaydon about the incident. He thanked his good fortune for the instinct that had impelled him to relate it only in its barest outlines. He had not mentioned the names of Carter or Matt nor had he indicated in any way that he had a suspicion of who the men might be.

Above all, he was glad that he had not told of the events that had followed after he had landed Phil Conway at the station up Dorsey's Creek—of his sight of the speeding boat cutting its phosphorescent wake through the waters of the Inlet and on down the coast, of his pursuit and his landing and of his stealthy creeping down the shore until he was in a position to see and hear the things that took place around the camp-fire.

He ate his breakfast in thoughtful silence, giving only moody nods or grunts in answer to Carl's enthusiastic eulogy of the generous and sportively inclined gentleman who had joined their little colony. The mechanician was too ardently full of his subject to notice at first the preoccupation of his employer, but when, at last, he could overlook it no longer, he shot a sharp glance of inquiry at Ward, nodded his head sagely, and his garrulity suddenly ceased.

He busied himself with the breakfast dishes as Fenton filled and lighted his pipe, but the smoke clouds had scarcely assumed the deep blue of perfect drawing before the mechanician hurried up to him.

"Cheese it, Chief," Carl said. "The big machine with the leaky compression is headed this way."

Ward looked up interrogatively.

"The—what?" he asked.

"You know; the cute little party with the high-speed pump. She's standing up on deck now looking like she'd rather do a Brodie than take a chance on the ladder. If she jumps, there'll be an earthquake."

Ward rose and knocked the tobacco from his pipe. He walked around the tent and came into view of the yacht in time to see Mrs. Herriot putting out one fat, experimental foot over the edge above the highest rung. She saw him at once and withdrew the foot.

"Young man," she called, "you turn your head the other way. I'm about to come down this ladder."

Ward laughed and turned his back.

"That won't do," she said. "You go on back to your tent, and I'll be with you some time during the morning."

He obeyed without further protest, and in a few minutes heard her deeply drawn breaths come sounding up to him.

"Carl," he said, "I understand now what you meant by the leaky compression. I can hear it."

She came up florid and warm, but beaming exultantly.

"There!" she exclaimed triumphantly. "It didn't take quite as long as I expected. Say, you—" she turned to Carl—"I'll give you five dollars to build a set of steps up to that deck by dinner-time."

Carl slapped the pocket that already contained the bill he had earned earlier in the morning.

"You can pay me tonight, ma'am," he said. "I'll get to work right away."

"Lord, but I'm lonely down here," Mrs. Herriot moaned, turning to Ward again. "Come for a litte walk on the beach with me. I want to hear somebody talk without quarreling."

"Quarreling?" Fenton asked in surprise. "I hope you haven't had a disagreement on the yacht."

"No; I haven't. But, after I went to bed last night, Stephen and Nellie kept it up for an hour. I could hear their voices, but I couldn't understand to save my life what they were saying."

"Did you try?"

She looked at him sharply.

"Young man," she retorted, "the woman doesn't live who can overhear a quarrel and not try to make out what the people are saying."

"I hope their quarrel was not a serious one?"

Ward's tone was light. He determined that he would not allow her to see how vitally interested he was in what she was saying. Yet he felt that, in some way, and probably a very direct one, this quarrel between Nellie and her uncle had an important bearing upon Stephen Blaydon's early-morning fishing-trip.

"Well," Mrs. Herriot mused, "I don't know how serious it was. As I say, I couldn't make out much, but their tones were certainly serious enough. I couldn't understand a thing until they got excited at the end and then I heard Nellie say, 'Uncle Stephen, I will never agree to it. You positively must not do it.' And then Stephen said, 'I don't give a—— whether you agree to it or not, Nellie. It's got to be done.' "

It was with considerable difficulty that Fenton maintained his pose of polite but distant interest. He stooped and picked up a shell from the beach and skimmed it out into the waves quite as if he were the most care-free individual in the world.

His suspicions were correct, then. Nellie and her uncle were not working in harmony. Stephen Blaydon was doing something of which the niece strongly disapproved, and it left Ward no doubt as to where he himself stood toward these two members of a divided family. It lent additional light to the girl's midnight trip alone down the coast to her uncle's camp.

"I suppose," he said, carelessly skimming another shell, "that they have different plans of action in dealing with the very difficult puzzle of *Caprice*."

"I don't think so," Mrs. Herriot replied. "Stephen tells me it isn't a puzzle any more. Poor Otto's dead, and it wasn't altogether unexpected, for the yacht was in no condition to put to sea, and Otto knew it."

"They have given up hope, then?" Again he made his tone as unconcerned as possible. "They accept the fact that the yacht was wrecked and Mr. Blaydon lost?"

She looked up at him with a suggestion of surprised suspicion.

"Yes," she said. "Was there any reason why they shouldn't?"

"Oh, no. I only meant that there might have been a hope that Mr. Blaydon and his crew escaped in a boat or were picked up by a passing vessel."

"No. Stephen says they would have been heard from by this time. Poor fellow; he's badly broken up about it. He was very fond of his brother in spite of their differences. You never met Otto, did you?"

"No."

"He was nice enough, but he was queer. He and Stephen were just as different as day and night. Isn't it funny that the good boy of a family usually dies first? Not that Stephen is bad, you know. He isn't. He's a perfect dear, and I love him a heap. But he's just easy-going, and he does adore a jamboree now and then, and he simply wouldn't work if you'd offer him a million a year. In fact, that's almost what his father did offer him to settle down to business, but Stephen got so tired out after a month of it that he's been resting ever since."

"Then Otto was the business man of the family?"

"Huh! Otto! Why, young man, Otto Blaydon would rather protect the family fortune and the family name than do anything in the world. He was just like one of those old-fashioned gentlemen you read about in books. I never knew a man who was so much a stickler for honor and dignity and all that sort of thing. And serious! My gracious! Nellie takes after her father a lot. She has his pride—uppishness, I call it. Why, they think the name of Blaydon ought to be in the Bible instead of in the social register."

"It is an old family, then?"

"Yes; it's one of the few that has blue blood dating away back before the flood and that produced men who could make enough money to keep up the style to go with it. They tell me Nellie's grandfather was a genius in business, and Nellie's father took after him, and more too, but poor Stephen missed all that. The only genius he has is for having a good time and showing a good time to everybody else.'

"But, if Otto Blaydon is dead, I suppose

Stephen will have to get to work to manage the family fortune, won't he?"

"That's what he's afraid of. He isn't saying much about his brother's death, and he doesn't want it known by the public for at least a year because, as he explained to me, Otto was just in the midst of a great big deal down there in South America, and it can still be pulled through provided the news don't get out. But Stephen says that if it does, it will cut the estate almost in half. He's quite scared about it. He made me promise in all kinds of ways that I'd keep it secret when I go back to New York. I told him if he'd pay my expenses for a year's trip through Europe, I'd keep my mouth shut. And I really believe he's going to do it."

Ward smiled at the amazing crudeness of the woman, but she puzzled him nevertheless. She seemed to have not the slightest feeling of sorrow over the death of the man she was about to marry. Then Nellie's odd phrase, in telling him of the engagement, recurred to him and he concluded that it was the Blaydon fortune and social position that had been the attraction more than the Blaydon heart.

"You say that *Caprice* was old and not fit to put to sea?" he asked, still maintaining his air of indifference.

"Yes. Stephen wanted Otto to sell her, but that was another thing that showed what a queer cuss Otto was. He said it wouldn't be honest to sell a boat like that to any one, and besides he didn't want the Blaydon's private yacht to fall into the hands of some of the *hoi-polloi* who might get into a scandal and bring the family name into it even indirectly. That was the one thing in the world that Otto Blaydon feared most—a scandal in the Blaydon family. He watched Stephen like a hawk, and only gave him enough allowance to get along on comfortably for fear that, if he had too much money, he'd get into a scandal somehow with his easy-going ways."

"Then Stephen has no money of his own?"

"Not a cent. The old man, Nellie's grandfather, was another crank like Otto and didn't believe in leaving any of the Blaydon fortune to be squandered by a man who might not be careful enough of his reputation and the reputation of the family. He made a hard and fast agreement with Otto before he died that Otto would take entire charge of his estate and keep Stephen on just allowance enough to let him live decently and easily. Otto had to promise not to give Stephen one extra cent unless Stephen earned it by some work that would reflect credit on the name. Name! Lord, if I was as careful of my name as these Blaydons, it would keep me thin worrying about it. But I'd miss an awful lot of fun in New York."

Ward laughed at the wry grimace she made at the thought of such a sacrifice.

"Stephen seems perfectly contented with the arrangement," he observed.

"Oh, yes. Stephen isn't so much of a spender. He isn't really bad; he just likes a good easy time, with plenty to eat and drink and no worry. He likes to stay up late at night while the fun's going on and sleep late in the morning so as not to see people going to business. That's why he's sleeping so late this morning, I guess. He can't get out of the habit."

"He isn't sleeping," Ward said. "In fact, he shamed us all by our laziness this morning. He was up before sunrise, had his breakfast and went fishing."

She stopped short and turned upon him, her keen, self-confident eyes searching into his.

"Say that again," she ordered.

Ward looked at her in surprise. Her tone was as peremptory as her manner, and both struck him as being rather uncalled for.

"I say," he repeated, "that he was up before sunrise this morning, had his breakfast and went fishing."

"Who did?"

"Why, Stephen Blaydon, of course."

She frowned upon him in angry unbelief.

"Young man," she said. "I never call a man a liar unless I know him pretty well. I'm sorry we're such slight acquaintances."

Ward flushed, and his look showed her plainly that he resented her remark.

"Go on and get mad if you want to," she said, nodding her head accusingly. "If I think you're lying to me, there's no reason why I shouldn't tell you so. If I had to keep it in, I'd bust. Either you're lying or there's something queer somewhere. Tell me what makes you think Stephen Blaydon went fishing."

He shrugged his shoulders at the uselessness of being angry at such a woman. In spite of his resentment, there was something refreshing in her brutal frankness.

"Mr. Blaydon gave my mechanician five dollars to get his breakfast and get him started," he said.

"Go on," she prompted. "I want to know the whole thing just as it happened."

He told her the story as Loder had told it to him. Throughout the narration her sharp eyes did not once leave his face. At its conclusion she held out a fat hand.

"I'm sorry I called you a liar," she said. "I apologize. I thought you were, but now I know better. Mr. Fenton, there are some things in this world that are queer, aren't there?"

"Yes," he agreed with a smile. "There are, undoubtedly, but I do not know just which ones you are referring to."

"No, of course not," she retorted sharply. "And what's more, you sha'n't. It's none of your business."

She turned on her heel and started back up the beach at a pace that surprised him.

"Come on," she said, "or stay there just as you like. I'm going back to that yacht and give Nellie Blaydon the third degree."

He hastened to her side in some consternation at her threat.

"The third degree?" he repeated. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to talk to her about my engagement to her father," she answered. "It's a subject she and I have never mentioned yet, but now we're going to."

They were at the tents by this time, and he stopped.

"Then I will stay here," he said.

"Of course you will!" she snapped. "You didn't suppose I wanted you butting in, did you?"

He smiled wryly as she left him. She was an odd character, he thought, and he wondered just for an instant whether her crude frankness were the result of actual, unspoiled honesty or whether it were a clever pose, carried out with consummate skill for her own purposes. Greiner and Phil would know about her. He would wait until they came to the camp and then find out exactly where she belonged in this tangle of the Blaydons.

IT WAS a dull day for him, working about the aeroplane with Carl. Several times he strolled around the tent to a point from which he could see the hull of *Caprice*, hoping that Nellie Blaydon might be on deck and that he could get a chance to talk to her. He had promised not to ask her questions and he proposed to keep that promise, but he knew that it would be easy to tell her several of the things that had happened and gain much from the swiftly mobile play of her expressive features.

In the afternoon he saw Mrs. Herriot on the deck, but he did not want Nellie to see him with her just at that time, so he did not approach the yacht, and the portly and garrulous widow made no move to indicate that she desired to talk to him.

It was well along toward sunset that he and Carl almost simultaneously caught the distant *putt-putt* of a small motor from down the cove, and knew that Stephen Blaydon was returning. They went out of the tent to look down the shore.

Mrs. Herriot had left the deck of *Caprice* and there was no sign of life aboard the yacht until, with the sound of the motor growing louder, Nellie Blaydon came up from the cabin. She caught sight of them as she emerged, nodded gravely to Ward, and then turned her back upon them, gazing down the cove toward the approaching boat.

"You'd better go down and get that tender," Ward said. "Mr. Blaydon will probably not bother to tie it up."

He went back into the tent and resumed his work. Much as he desired to be present when Stephen Blaydon returned, he knew that he could find no excuse for being on the shore to greet him.

In half an hour Carl returned to the tent. He did not start again at his work. Instead, he sat down near Ward and gazed interrogatively at his employer.

"Chief," he said finally.

"Well?"

"Did Miss Blaydon and her uncle have a scrap?"

Ward glanced up quickly, but managed to hide his surprise at the mechanician's question.

"A scrap?" he repeated. "How the devil should I know?"

"I don't know," Loder said slowly. "But it sounds to me like they did. I hope not, for I like them both."

"What are you driving at?"

"Why, Miss Nellie came down to the shore to meet Mr. Blaydon and they left the boat with me. When they had gone a little way up, Mr. Blaydon stopped and said 'Well?' And Miss Nellie said, 'I have not changed my mind, Uncle Stephen. I can not agree to your doing it.' And he sort of grunted and said, 'Well, it doesn't matter if you can't, because I've done it.' That was all. What is it Mr. Blaydon has done, Chief? I thought he went fishing."

Loder suddenly sprang to his feet as a thought struck him.

"Wait a minute!" he cried. "I forgot something."

He dashed out of the tent, and Fenton heard his footsteps scrambling down toward the yacht. In five minutes he returned. His eyes were staring in amazement, and he stood in the flap looking at his employer without a word. Finally he blurted it out.

"What do you think, Chief? I put ten gallons of gasoline in that tender's tank this morning for Mr. Blaydon's fishing-trip. There's only about three there now."

He took a pencil from his pocket and began calculating on a piece of wood.

"Eight horse-power," he said. "Call it a pint per horse-power per hour. Gallon an hour. Give him seven miles an hour; seven gallons—why, Chief, that man has run fifty miles or more today."

He stared at Ward, but the aviator made no answer. His own thoughts were too busy.

"That's some fishing-trip, isn't it?" the mechanician exclaimed.

Still Ward did not answer, and Loder glanced at him sharply.

"All right, Chief," he said with a resigned shrug. "It's none of my business. I'm shut up."

CHAPTER X

NELLIE GIVES A WARNING

CARL LODER'S face was a study as he served their evening meal. His eyes were big and brilliant with the ecstasy of adventure and mystery, but when he glanced at Fenton they clouded with a look so reproachful that the aviator could not ignore it.

"Never mind, Carl," he said good-naturedly. "You mustn't be discouraged because I don't tell you the meaning of everything as soon as it happens. Sometimes that is because I don't know the meaning myself. That's honestly what it is in this case."

"You mean about Mr. Blaydon's fishing-trip?"

"Yes. I believe that trip has some significance that he would give a good deal more than five dollars to keep secret, and I propose to find out somehow what it is. I have suspicions."

"You mean you've got a clue?"

"Yes; several of them."

The mechanician's eyes gleamed with a fresh light.

"Gee, Chief!" he exclaimed. "I do love clues."

Ward smiled at the fellow's enthusiasm.

"You will have to be patient," he said. "Several things have happened lately that you do not know about yet, and they have an important bearing on these clues. I'll let you know as soon as I find out, and I think it will give you material for half a dozen movie scenarios."

"All right, Chief," Carl agreed. "I'll try not to ask questions, but it's mighty hard with so many exciting things happening. You know, I always wanted to do this kind of thing, and it's the first chance I've ever had. You just shut me up when I butt in too much."

"Thanks," Ward said, laconically. "I will."

He strolled on the beach with his pipe, leaving Loder about the tents. He wanted to think, but he had scarcely marshaled these new facts in orderly array when the mechanician came running down to him.

"Oh, Chief," Carl panted, breathless from excitement. "What do you think? Mr. Blaydon just came to the tents for you. He says will you please join him and Miss Nellie on the yacht. They want to talk to you."

Ward drew a deep breath. He felt that the invitation was portentous.

"All right," he said. "I'll go."

He found uncle and niece seated under the awning, with the rays of a lantern, hung over Carl's new stairway from the sand, reaching them with only a faint illumination. Stephen Blaydon rose and greeted him with a trifle too much warmth and cordiality, Ward thought, but the girl merely inclined her head gravely in answer to his salutation.

"Sit down, Fenton, sit down," said Blaydon. "Have a cigar? No? All right; I'll smoke if you don't mind."

He lighted a match, and, as its flame flared up, Ward cast a quick, inquiring glance at the girl. What he saw startled him.

She looked ten years older than the last time he had talked with her. Her eyes were staring straight ahead with an expression almost of vacancy, like the eyes of a person whose reason had been overthrown by some inexpressible horror. Her face was haggard almost to the point of emaciation. She looked as if she had neither eaten nor slept for many days and nights, and the pallor of her cheeks threw the drawn lines into more startling relief.

The vacant eyes turned to his just as the match went out. It had been only the briefest of glances, but short as it was he saw that it had brought up once more that terror he had surprised there several times in the past.

"Now," said Blaydon, puffing rapidly at his cigar. "I wanted to ask you just a few more questions about that affair you had here the other night. You know, the time those fellows tackled you and Conway here and you shot at them. Nellie says you didn't tell her anything about it."

"No," said Ward. "I did not care to alarm her needlessly. I was quite prepared to take care of them if they returned, and I felt that Miss Blaydon had far too much to worry her as it was."

"Ah, yes; I see. That was mighty considerate of you — mighty considerate. Wasn't it, Nellie?"

He turned to the girl, whose silhouette was barely discernible. She had shrunk back as far as possible out of the dim glow from the distant lantern, and Ward could not be certain whether her head nodded in reply to her uncle's question or not. But Stephen Blaydon continued without waiting for any further answer.

"You say you were prepared for them if they returned. How are you prepared?"

"Both Carl and I are light sleepers and good shots."

"You carry a revolver, then?"

"No; but I keep one in my tent, and so does Loder."

There was the merest suggestion of a sigh that sounded like relief from the man with the cigar.

"Well, I'm glad to know that. I never monkeyed much with guns, so I wouldn't be of much use in a scrap like that. We'll have to depend on you and Carl if those fellows come back."

Ward laughed easily. He felt like crying out in open derision at this labored attempt to deceive him. He was sorely tempted to exclaim, "Oh, quit it, Blaydon! I know you are the head of that gang." But he waited patiently to see how far this acting would go.

"You think they are likely to come back, then?" he asked.

"I do," said Blaydon emphatically. "I met a fellow today—while I was fishing. Queer old chap, he was. Lives in a shack back in the woods somewhere. He tells me there is a gang of beach-combers around here—you know, fellows who rob wrecked ships and shipwrecked people and all that sort of thing. I suppose they found out that you had hauled up a good-looking yacht, and they figure she's worth having for her fittings and things. You couldn't describe these men to me, could you?"

There was a touch of anxiety in the tone that was not lost upon Fenton.

"No," the aviator replied. "I did not see them. But Phil Conway can give you a very complete description when he gets back."

"Oh, yes. Certainly. By the way, when do you expect him? Did you wire him that I would appreciate it if he would come down here at once."

"Yes; I wired him last night. John Drummond took my message to Sea View, with orders to wait for an answer."

"And John's not back yet? Not worried about him, are you?"

"Oh, no. Phil might not get my wire until tonight. He has probably been rushing all around New York today. John ought to get back in the morning."

"Good. I'd be obliged if you'd let me know what Conway's plans are. I'm especially anxious to have a good talk with him about—well, about all these things."

He paused, and even in the dim light Fenton could see that he was fidgeting uneasily.

"You say Phil saw the fellows, eh?" he finally asked.

"Yes."

"Plainly? That is, plainly enough to identify them if he ever saw them again?"

The man seemed fairly writhing under the torture of this unaccustomed mental effort.

"Yes, indeed. Why? Do you want him to describe them to you?"

"Oh, no—that is, yes, in a way. You see, of course we must take some measures of protection against them, and the people I have put on this case ought to know what kind of men they are dealing with. Don't you see? And then, of course, if I catch them—and I fully expect I shall—Phil can identify them and—and—oh, all that sort of thing. He could do it, couldn't he?"

"Very easily. He saw the men for quite some time in bright light and talked to them. I'm sure he would know them again anywhere."

Again he could see Blaydon writhe. It was not welcome news, evidently.

"Well," he said, "that will make things easier when we get them. It will be a good thing to clear out a gang of beach-combers like that."

"Then you really do not think that they had anything to do with the scuttling of *Caprice?*"

"Oh, *Caprice* wasn't scuttled. We've discussed it in all its aspects, Nellie and I, and we have been forced to accept the unpleasant fact that my brother went down with the yacht."

Ward was conscious of a slight sound from the girl in the shadows. It was like a sharply intaken breath of pain, and his heart went out to her in sympathy for her suffering.

"But," he objected, "I do not quite see how you reconcile that with the evidence. Those plug-holes in the bottom look most suspicious to me."

"Well, now, I'll tell you." Blaydon crossed his legs and uncrossed them again. "You'd understand it better if you had only known Otto. He had a lot of peculiarities, but he came by them honestly, for my father was the same way. I don't think my father ever in his life took advantage of another man in a business deal. It was always his boast that the money he made was clean. People who had dealings with him knew that if things were not exactly as he represented them, they could come right back at him and he would give them satisfaction. That was the principle he did business on, and he trained Otto the same way."

"I understood your brother was most punctilious."

"He was. That's why he wouldn't sell *Caprice*. She's an old boat. She was a steam yacht in the early days, and he had her converted to gasoline and her cabins all rearranged, but it's the same old hull and it's rotten clean through. A few years ago he rented her to a friend while he took a trip through Europe, and this other fellow put her in the water without a decent job of coppering her bottom. He took her South in the Winter, and what the shipworms did to her was something fierce. She's fairly honeycombed.

"Your brother did not have her planks renewed?"

"No; said it wasn't worth while because he had plans for a new boat anyhow that he liked better—one of these new-type cruising houseboats with all the comforts of home and a good turn of speed, beside being seaworthy enough for any of our inside waters. I wanted him to sell *Caprice*, but he wouldn't hear of it."

"So I understood."

Blaydon looked up sharply, his cigar poised half-way to his lips.

"You did? Who told you?"

"Mrs. Herriot."

"H'm. I see. Nellie tells me that she spoke to you about my brother's engagement to Mrs. Herriot. You understand that we want the matter kept entirely secret—especially in view of what has happened?"

"I have promised Miss Blaydon not to mention it."

"Well, that's good. As I was saying, Otto wouldn't sell *Caprice* just because of the way he had been brought up by my father. He didn't think it would be honest. He could have patched her up and got a fairly good price for her, but she never would have been safe. So he made up his mind to break her up himself, take out whatever was worth using and put it on his new boat. I imagine that explains the plug-holes."

"But," Ward protested, "I don't quite see that."

"Why, I believe he intended to sink her, and then, when this deal in South America came up, he decided to make this last trip on her and sink her when he got back. It looks to me as if they got caught in a storm off here and were probably riding to a drog, with their engine stopped and everybody on deck busy with the boat and stuff. The pitching of the yacht probably loosened the plugs, and before any one on deck could notice it in the general excitement, she was full of water, and they either went down with her or clung to whatever wreckage they could find floating."

"I see. Then, don't you think there is a chance that some of them reached shore or were picked up by a passing ship?"

"I had hoped so, but my inquiries in New York, as soon as Nellie told me you had found the yacht, have convinced me that they would have been heard from by this time. So we have been forced to the conclusion that my poor brother is lost."

Blaydon's voice shook as he pronounced the last sentence. From the deep shadows in which the girl hid came another sharply drawn breath of pain. Blaydon rose and began pacing nervously up and down the deck, puffing jerkily at his cigar.

"It leaves us in a most unpleasant predicament," he said, pausing before the aviator. "Aside from the natural shock of such a loss to us, it involves financial matters of such great importance that it is now absolutely essential that no word of this tragedy be allowed to reach the public for possibly a year."

"You need have no fear of that on my account, Mr. Blaydon."

"Well, that's good of you. You see, Otto had just started the biggest deal of his life in South America. It can still be pulled through if the people down there continue to believe that they are dealing with him. He left a large part of the New York end in my hands, and I can still put it across if I'm left alone. It means just about doubling the estate, so you see I feel justified in taking any measures necessary to protect myself—which means to keep this thing quiet. You understand that, don't you?"

"Perfectly."

Fenton kept his tone calm and unemotional, but he nevertheless recognized the hidden threat in Blaydon's words.

"And I not only propose to protect myself, but I'll make it mighty well worth anybody's while to leave me alone and do as I want until I'm through. I mean that any way you want to take it."

Blaydon paused and stood before Fenton impressively, his big bulk making a gigantic silhouette in the lantern's light. Ward began to see that there might, after all, be some comparatively innocent reason for the camp down the shore. If, as Blaydon claimed, this deal was of such vast dimensions, it was only natural to expect him to take drastic measures not to have it interfered with.

"You need not have any fear of me, Mr. Blaydon," he said reassuringly. "I am not much given to interfering with things that do not concern me, and as for making it worth my while, that need not enter into our relations in any way."

"Well, that's good of you, isn't it Nellie?"

He turned to the girl, but Ward could see no movement from the shadows nor could he hear any sound that indicated a response.

"There's just one thing more," Blaydon continued. "Before we leave here, I must go over *Caprice* and see what she's worth for breaking up. The engine looks to me as if it might be put in shape to bring a couple of thousand dollars, and I wondered if you and that young fellow of yours—Loder—wouldn't give me the benefit of your expert advice."

"Why, certainly," Fenton agreed cordially. "Any time."

"Good! Call Loder over now, will you? We'll go below and have a look at it."

Ward went to the railing and shouted for Carl. The lamp in the tent moved, and soon the mechanician's voice answered him.

"Did you call, Chief?"

"Yes; come over to the yacht at once, will you?"

Carl set down his lantern and was soon climbing up his new stairway.

"Good!" said Blaydon again. "We'll go below and just see if the machinery is badly damaged by its bath."

He led the way to the hatch and down into the cabins, but Nellie Blaydon did not move. Throughout the long conversation she had sat like a woman in a trance, only the occasional sharp breaths of pain indicating that she was listening to what the men were saying.

BLAYDON led them into the engine-room in the forward part of the yacht.

"Now," he said, turning to Carl, "Mr. Fenton has given me permission to use you and your knowledge of engines, but don't think I want you to do it for nothing. If a cook's worth five dollars, an engineer's worth twenty-five."

"All right, Mr. Blaydon," said Carl quietly. Ward glanced at him curiously, for it did not sound at all like the usual enthusiasm of the mechanician. Loder, apparently, had changed his opinion of the sporting qualities of the gentleman who lied about his fishing.

"What I would like you to do now," Blaydon continued, evidently not aware of the change in Carl's bearing, "is to take off the cylinder-heads and see the condition of the insides and the rings. I'm afraid the salt water may have ruined them. You can do that, can't you?"

"Yes, sir. Easily."

"All right. You look her over now, and I'll go up and get that lantern from the deck. These lights don't seem to be much good in spite of all the fixing you have done to 'em."

He left them and climbed again to the deck, while Carl bent over the big engine in a preliminary survey.

"Those heads will come off easily enough, Chief," he said. "If this is another clue, though, it's a mighty queer one."

"I don't think it is," Ward replied. "Mr. Blaydon wants to sell whatever will bring money when *Caprice* is broken up. He thinks he can get a couple of thousand dollars from the engine."

"That's what he says," corrected Carl. "He said this morning he was going fishing. There's a lantern in that other cabin there. Do you mind getting it while I hunt out the tools? I'll need plenty of light."

Ward walked through the passageway into the next cabin. He found the lantern and turned to go to the engine-room again when he heard a sound from the deck and paused. It came to him again, the sound of Nellie Blaydon's voice in a tense whisper saying something to her uncle.

Through a window in the cabin-trunk he suddenly saw a lantern swung down and then back and forth in regular rhythm. Then the girl's voice came to him, louder and more vibrant this time, and he caught her words distinctly.

"Uncle Stephen!" she cried. "What are you doing?"

"Shut up, Nellie," Blaydon's bass voice growled angrily.

But the figure of the girl suddenly darted out into the rays of the swinging lantern.

"I will not," she cried. "I tell you——"

"For God's sake, Nellie," the bass voice pleaded hoarsely, "won't you shut up? You'll ruin everything if——"

But the girl darted from his side to the hatch and, with her voice shaking, called excitedly—

"Mr. Fenton—Mr. Fenton!"

"What is it?" cried Ward.

"Hurry up! Some one is at your aeroplane-tents!"

He heard Stephen Blaydon blurt out an oath at the girl, and she uttered a little cry as though she had been struck.

"Carl!" he shouted. "Come quick!"

With a leap he was up on deck. As his head appeared above the hatchway, Blaydon's great voice boomed out:

"Hey, there, you! Get out of those tents. What are you doing there, anyway?"

"Shut up, you —— fool," snapped Fenton. "Are you trying to warn them?"

"Excuse me; I got rattled," said Blaydon. "Come on! We'll get 'em!"

He sprang for the steps just as Ward started and the two collided with an impact that sent both staggering backward. Blaydon, being the heavier, lost less of his balance and at once sprang back for the steps. Ward followed almost immediately, but Blaydon, reaching the bottom, suddenly turned and dashed upward again, shouting—

"I must get a gun, or something."

His unexpected movement brought the men once more into collision and Ward went down with a jar that half stunned him.

But the delays thus caused had, if done purposely, accomplished their end. Shaken by his fall, Ward arose in time to see two shadowy figures dart away from the aeroplane-tent and disappear toward the ocean side of the point. Unceremoniously, he shoved Stephen Blaydon out of his way, leaped to the beach and ran up the slope. He heard the lighter footsteps of Carl Loder following and the fleet-footed mechanician passed him.

Reaching the tents, Carl swung into pursuit of the fugitive but, as he turned, stopped as if shot.

"Chief!" he cried in horror, "Chief! Stop! They've set the tent on fire!"

With the thought of his aeroplane threatened by flames, Ward rushed up to the mechanician. A little tongue of light was visible under the sidewall of the tent and its glow shone through the heavy canvas.

"Get sand!" Ward shouted. "I'll get the extinguisher!"

He rushed into the tent where the big machine was outlined clearly by the glow of the fire. Ducking under the wires, he reached into the hull, tore the extinguisher from its rack, turned the handle and, leaping to the blaze, pumped the chemical upon it. In a few seconds it died down and he was left in darkness.

"Good!" said Carl's voice. "Wait till I get the lantern and we'll see what it was."

The light showed them their blankets piled up against the sidewall of the tent and the smell of gasoline told its story of interrupted incendiarism. They stood gazing down at it ruefully, Fenton with the lust for revenge gleaming in his eyes. But his thoughts were broken by the arrival of Stephen Blaydon who came lumbering in to them.

"That's those infernal beach-combers I told you about, I'll bet," he boomed in his big voice. "I'm going to get those fellows; you see if I don't. Any damage?"

He came in and stood beside Carl, muttering angry curses as he saw the evidences of attempted destruction. Fenton, too angry to trust himself near the man, backed away, his hatred blazing from his eyes. He was about to blurt out his accusation when he heard a whisper behind him and, turning, saw the shadowy form of Nellie Blaydon at the flap. The girl beckoned to him. He went over to her.

"Please!" she whispered, grasping his arm with fingers that clutched and quivered, "I know you know! Please, for my sake, say nothing to him."

CHAPTER XI

ALLIES

SHE was gone before he could answer. He saw her dim figure merge with the deep shadows of the shore as she made her way back to the yacht, and for the moment he was strongly tempted to rush after her, to demand an explanation, to claim it as his right now that the tangle of events was involving the destruction of his own property. And he longed, also, to speak a word of reassurance to her. He wanted to let her know that she had one stanch friend who would stand by her in her predicament.

"For my sake," she had said, and again came the memory of her words on the deck of *Caprice*, "I need you very, very much."

For her sake, he resolved, he would do anything. He would even master the rage that consumed him as he heard Stephen Blaydon's voice in the tent. He would take up the thread of events once more where he had so suddenly dropped it and would permit no outward sign to show this man that his blundering had revealed his villainy.

Blaydon's blustering tones recalled Ward to his surroundings. He walked over to where Carl and the man were examining the charred blankets.

"Look over the machine, Carl," he said quietly. "They may have damaged it before starting the fire."

"Fenton, this is a damnable trick of those fellows," Blaydon said. "Why, man, I believe they were trying to wreck the machine in the hopes that you would get scared off and they could sell the metal in her. Rather valuable, I imagine—that is, from the viewpoint of such people as these beach-combers—isn't it?"

"Quite," Ward drawled listlessly. "Undoubtedly that was it."

"Well, I'll bet I'll get 'em before I'm through." Blaydon's tone was blustering again. His eyes were most uneasy when they looked at Ward, but, for the most part, they were kept studiously averted.

"Do," said Ward, still without any show of interest. Then he walked over to join Carl in his inspection of the machine.

The mechanician looked up at him curiously. Carl knew every tone and gesture of his employer, and something in the drawl of the few words to Blaydon had told him that Fenton was with difficulty holding himself in hand. Blaydon, apparently ignorant of this, followed them about the machine, blustering and fuming with every semblance of rage at the attack.

"Say, Fenton," he said finally, "it was devilish stupid and clumsy of me to get in your way the way I did coming off the yacht. I was completely rattled—that's the long and short of it. Never felt so rattled in my life. First I thought of doing one thing and then another, and the result was I didn't do anything but keep you from acting. I'm mighty sorry—honest."

"Oh, that's all right," Fenton said. Blaydon seemed to notice for the first time the patient martyrdom of the tone.

"—— it all, man!" he exclaimed, "you're huffy again. I never in my life saw a man who got huffy as easily as you do. Why, you might think I did it on purpose."

Fenton straightened and looked him squarely in the eyes.

"Yes," he said evenly, "you might." Then, as he saw the frightened look that followed his words, he added with a forced smile, "But of course I know you did not."

"No; of course not," Blaydon agreed emphatically. "Of course not. Why should I—eh? I'm as anxious to get these fellows cleaned out as you can be, for, first thing you know, they'll come down here and strip *Caprice* before I can make arrangements to sell her. Of course I wouldn't do such a thing on purpose. I was badly rattled—that's all."

He strolled uneasily about the tent, as if trying to make up his mind what to say next, his lips moving constantly as he muttered to himself. At length he planted himself before them with his hands in his pockets.

"Anything broken?" he asked.

"No," Ward answered.

"You can fly her again?"

"Without the slightest difficulty."

"Hm——"

Blaydon pursed his lips in deep thought, and then, with a shrug of his shoulders, turned and walked over to the flap.

"Well," he said, "I guess you don't need me any more. I'll go aboard the yacht and see if I can get some sleep after all the excitement. Good night."

"Good night," Ward responded without enthusiasm.

"And say—" Blaydon half turned to reenter—"for Heaven's sake, quit getting so huffy with me, won't you? I'm not a bad sort—just excitable and easily rattled and all that. You see, I've never figured in anything like this before. Fact is, I didn't know such things really happened. You just hold your horses and we'll get along all right."

He waited for an answer, but Ward busied himself about the machine.

"Well, good night," said Blaydon.

"Good night," muttered Ward from under the plane.

They heard his heavy footsteps go crunching down the sand. Then Carl came over and held out a five-dollar bill to Ward.

"You give that back to him, Chief, will you?" he asked. "I don't understand this whole thing, but I can tell from the way you acted that he had something to do with this tonight. And if he had, he's a crook, and I don't take money from crooks."

Ward smiled at the lad's earnestness.

"Keep it until I find out a little more about him," he advised. "To give it back to him now would be equivalent to calling him a crook to his face, and I am not ready to do that yet. Let's get to bed now without any more discussion. I expect to learn more in the morning."

Fenton was certain that the new day would bring Nellie Blaydon to him. After what had taken place on *Caprice*, and with her knowledge that Ward's suspicions had been aroused, she would feel it necessary to talk with him, if for no other reason than to try to explain it all in a way that would make her uncle's actions seem less culpable.

SHE came to him in the morning as he was pacing thoughtfully up and down the shore. He saw her walking slowly through the trees about the tents, her head bent dejectedly, her fine shoulders drooping with a weight of care that seemed to be too much for her to bear.

Her steps lagged dispiritedly. She glanced up and saw him standing hat in hand waiting for her, but she gave no sign of recognition beyond a slight straightening of the shoulders, as though she did not want him to see the depression that bore her down.

He held out his hand to her and she placed hers in it, limp and lifeless and cold. The feel of her flesh shocked him with its chill. It told of a system away below par, of blood lagging sluggishly in the veins, of lack of vitality verging almost upon collapse.

In her eyes as she looked up at him he read the tragic story of her sleepless night. They were dulled with the film of worry and unrest, drawn into lines of suffering and unhappiness. His heart went out to her in sympathy for the pain he saw.

"I knew that you would come," he said. "But you could have spared yourself the ordeal if you had wished."

She glanced up questioningly.

"Spared myself?" she asked. "I am afraid the time has passed for me to think of sparing myself. After last night——"

He held up a protesting hand.

"Miss Blaydon," he said earnestly, "last night is dead and forgotten so far as I am concerned. You need not speak of it."

She tried bravely to force a smile.

"You are kind," she said, "but I am

afraid you are offering more than human nature is capable of giving. I have not come so much to explain, as to ask you, if possible, to be lenient in your judgment. I saw you in the cabin just as I—as I spoke to my uncle last night, so I know you saw and heard. You have, therefore, a right to demand an explanation."

"I forfeit that right voluntarily and gladly," he assured her. "You have been suffering lately. I have seen it in the change that has come over you since that day when I went to Baltimore with the news of the discovery of *Caprice*. I have noticed since you have been here how the worry has been telling on you. I shall not add to your troubles by my curiosity. You need not explain anything."

She shook her head.

"Some things I must explain," she declared. "You said once that you would help me in any way you could, if I needed help. Was that only a pretty speech or did you really mean it?"

There was something in the tone of her voice, some flash of intimacy in the half-timid uplift of her eyes, that made Fenton's heart leap exultantly.

"I said that I would do anything in the world to make you happy," he said. "I meant it then. I repeat it now. If your uncle wants to have my aeroplane destroyed for some reason unknown to me, I will make no resistance if you will only assure me that it will help you in your present trouble. I said before that I would do as you desire and ask no questions. That also I repeat. You may feel absolutely free to use me in any way. I'm going to stay and do what I can to make those lines of trouble disappear from your eyes and to see you walk with that same free, happy, healthy stride that first brought you to me in your home in Baltimore. And, now that we understand it thoroughly, let's get right down to business. You and your uncle have been quarreling lately. Can I help?"

She glanced up, startled.

"You have known that?" she asked. "What have you heard?"

"Nothing. I do not know the reason, nor have I overheard anything, but I know that you have disagreed. You showed that plainly by your actions last night."

She breathed a sigh of relief.

"Ah, yes; to be sure. Last night we did disagree. Uncle Stephen seems to me to have lost his head in the dilemma that confronts him here and I am afraid of him. He is so absolutely determined not to allow one word to be known about *Caprice* until he has arranged everything, that I am afraid. He is so unused to handling important affairs, so entirely unfitted for such a responsibility, that he is likely to go to any extreme to force you and me and every one to do as he wishes."

"But," Ward protested, "I have already assured you that I will stay here and say nothing."

"I know." She smiled gratefully, but with a little gesture of helplessness. "You have been most comforting to me—but Uncle Stephen is so completely upset by what has happened that he will not trust any one."

"That is the reason, then, why he is so anxious to have Phil Conway return?"

He saw the quick color mounting to her cheeks, and again the eyes that she lifted to his flashed him that fleeting look of fright.

"Yes—" her voice faltered a moment—"and it was particularly about that that I wanted to speak. You will get Mr. Conway to come back at once, won't you?"

The memory of his telegram to Phil came to him reproachfully with the pleading in her tone.

"I have wired him," he said slowly.

"Wired him to come?"

"I told him your uncle urged him to return immediately."

"Oh, thank you—thank you." He flushed guiltily at her genuine relief. "I am sure he will do as you ask. But—" she faltered again and her forehead gathered into a little frown of uneasiness—"there is one other thing that is more important than all the rest, and yet I have no right to ask it of you. It will seem most presumptuous."

"I shall not consider anything presumptuous under the present circumstances," he assured her. "You need not hesitate to ask anything that will make things easier for you."

"Then—" her voice was low and unsteady—"I ask you to have your detective withdraw from this case at once."

"Greiner?"

"Yes. Uncle Stephen tells me that you and Mr. Conway have engaged him to investigate an attack on this camp. If I tell you that I am in a position to assure you that the attack will not be repeated, will you have Mr. Greiner drop his investigations?"

He was tempted to ask her how she could give such an assurance, to force her to admit her association with the men encamped down the shore, to demand an explanation of her trip by moonlight in her speed-boat, but he held his curiosity in check. The girl was so palpably tortured by this ordeal of talking to him without revealing too much of her secret that he could not find it in his heart to add to her pain.

"Will you wire him?" she persisted, noticing his hesitation.

"I do not know Mr. Greiner," he said. "But, if it will make you any happier, I am willing to wire Mr. Conway, urging him to drop the case entirely."

She breathed a deep sigh and her shoulders straightened as if a great weight had been lifted from them.

"That is most kind—most kind," she said. "I really feel that we—Uncle Stephen and I—are justified in asking it. It is, after all, a most intimate family affair and we should be permitted to pursue our investigations along our own lines. As Uncle Stephen explained to you last night, there are most important interests involved in keeping it all an absolute secret, and you can easily understand that we might be badly hampered if a detective employed by any one else should interfere with our plans."

He watched the play of expression over her face for a moment without replying. Then, in a tone more earnest than he had yet used, he said:

"Miss Blaydon, you must pardon the brutality of the question, but are you altogether confident of the honesty of your uncle?"

The color suddenly fled from her cheeks, leaving them white. She looked up at him searchingly with a terror that was not altogether that of surprise.

"I do not—not quite—understand," she faltered.

"I mean," he persisted as kindly as he could, "haven't you and he quarreled lately because his plans have not altogether agreed with your ideas, have not altogether met with your approval?"

"I—yes," she admitted hesitatingly.

"Have you been fully convinced that all of his acts have been justified?"

"No, not all of them."

"Don't some of them leave an opening for the suspicion that he may have some motive other than the natural one of wishing to handle your father's affairs to the best advantage?"

"I—I can not quite see what you mean. You think——"

"I'll tell you what I think, Miss Blaydon," he said, interrupting her as she seemed at a loss for words. "I don't believe your uncle's theory of the loss of *Caprice*. I believe that she was scuttled by her crew. I believe that your father was not drowned by accident, but by the men who scuttled the yacht. If he was not drowned, I believe that he is being held a prisoner somewhere by them. And I believe that your uncle knows who these men were and where they are now, and, if he has given you any other explanation, it has been a cleverly concocted scheme to deceive you."

She held up her hand in a gesture of despair.

"Oh, stop—stop!" she cried. "You don't know what you are saying. It isn't possible! It isn't conceivable that he could do such a thing!"

"Nevertheless," Ward persisted, "I believe that your uncle is open to suspicions of the most serious nature. That is what Mr. Conway believes, and that is what Mr. Greiner's investigations so far tend to prove."

She stood before him, tense, staring at him in consternation, seemingly unable to frame her thoughts into words. The fright that he had seen in her eyes was turned to horror; her mind appeared numbed with a thought too loathsome for belief.

"I am sorry," he continued kindly, hating himself for the pain he was causing. "You will think me brutal to say such things, but it is only because I am convinced that ignorance of them will bring you more unhappiness in the future that I am willing to cause you this unhappiness now."

He waited a moment for her to speak, but she still stood there motionless, staring at him.

"Don't you think," he continued, "that it would be better for you to be more open and frank with me so that I can be in a better position to help you?"

She roused herself with an effort. Her frightened eyes looked all about her and then came back to him, their pupils veiled with a film of dazed stupefaction.

"I—I don't know," she whispered. "I

can not tell—yet. What you say is too awful, too incredible. I must think. I shall have to rest and then decide."

She took a step toward him stumblingly. He put out his hand to steady her, and she placed hers in his, unquestioningly, confidently, trustingly, like a child in the dark. He thrilled at the pressure of her fingers.

A wild desire came over him to take her bodily in his arms and carry her, to sweep her suddenly from her feet with his own strength and to demand that she rest there and let him bear the burdens for both. Some voice of primitive manhood seemed to cry out within him to take her and assert his mastery.

She seemed to sense this as she glanced up at him again. It brought her back suddenly to her realities; whether it were shock or surprise or anger, it gave her control once more over herself, and she withdrew her hand from his, not quickly nor with any hint of irritation, but with a firmness that forbade resistance.

He flushed as he saw that his inner thoughts had revealed themselves to her. He felt like a brute that she should have found him lusting for possession of her at the very moment when he should have forgotten self in his anxiety to relieve the strain under which she was suffering.

"I'm sorry," he murmured, but she smiled almost brightly.

"I am all right again," she said. "I felt weak for a moment. My head has been aching all morning. I did not sleep last night."

She drew a deep breath and squared her shoulders once more.

"Your suspicions of Uncle Stephen," she said slowly, "may seem to you to be justified, but I ask you not to allow them to become too strong. I wish I could tell you some things—there are phases of this case that you do not understand—but, unfortunately, I can not. But please do not let last night's regrettable occurrence prejudice you too strongly against Uncle Stephen. He is terribly upset and hardly responsible for what he does, but I assure you that he is honest."

Ward repressed the sneer that he felt curling his lips. It seemed so palpably evident to him that Stephen Blaydon was merely using Nellie for his own purposes, that he almost resented her defense of her uncle.

"It is not for me to be suspicious," he said. "I feel that I have dropped out of the case entirely except as an enforced onlooker. I merely thought it best to suggest to you that your own interests may be jeopardized by too much faith in him. You are the one to decide whether I am right or wrong, and how much importance to place upon my suggestions."

"Thank you," she said gratefully. "I shall think them over seriously. Uncle Stephen has, as I have admitted, done many things lately that have not seemed to me to be justified, but to suspect him of really carrying out such a crime, and against my father, is simply appalling. I can not believe it possible."

"Let me suggest something else, then," he urged. "Let me wire Phil Conway to bring Greiner down here to Sea View so that we can find out just what they have learned. Then you can decide."

"No—no!" she cried. "Please—if you are willing to do nothing else for me—have Mr. Greiner drop the case entirely. It is the one thing that I ask of you above all else. Please tell me that you will do it."

He shrugged in hopeless resignation.

"Very well," he said. "Since you insist, and since it is, after all, none of my business, I will wire Conway tonight."

"Thank you again." Her eyes showed the relief that his promise had given her. "And if, after thinking it over seriously, I feel that Uncle Stephen is not acting with perfect honesty, you will let me come to you again for help, won't you?"

"Let you!" Ward's tone made her flush, but it was not altogether with displeasure. "I should feel mighty bad if you went to any one else down here. It is only in the hope that I can help you that I am staying at all. This sort of thing isn't in my line and I don't relish it particularly."

"Then that is understood," she said with a bright nod of her brown head. "You are to call Greiner off the case and stop suspecting Uncle Stephen; I am to think over what you have said and come to you if I need help. Will you walk with me back to the yacht?"

They had gone well up the shore beyond the camp, strolling aimlessly as they talked. Now, as they turned back, the girl bent her steps inland toward the shores of the cove where the trees were thicker and the vegetation more dense. Ward walked beside her, his head bent in deep thought.

Every now and then he glanced up at her and smiled to see the freer swing with which she carried herself and the brighter, clearer glance of her deep eyes. She had found relief in her talk with him; that much was very evident. Her shoulders were no longer stooped as they had been when he had seen her coming toward him from *Caprice*, her feet no longer lagged dispiritedly. Even the lines of care and sleeplessness seemed smoothed.

"You look better," he said, smiling at her.

She smiled back at him.

"I feel better," she said. "Somehow, in spite of the awful things you have said, I have found comfort from you this morning. I have never had to bear burdens alone before. I have always had my—my father to go to. Now my father is not here to act as my refuge, but you seem somehow to have taken his place and you have inspired me with new confidence. I feel that I have a friend who will help, no matter what happens."

"Yes," said Ward, simply but with compelling earnestness, "no matter what happens, I will help. Shall we walk inland a little farther? The underbrush is rather thick on the shore along here."

They turned in among the trees and walked slowly and in silence, each busy with the thoughts that their talk had brought to them. A hundred yards above the tents, they skirted a knoll that jutted out to the shore, falling in a steep bank of red clay straight to the water's edge. They had passed it and were among the trees again when the sound of voices came to them from behind the knoll.

Involuntarily, both stopped and listened. It was not with any idea of hearing what was being said, but rather a natural curiosity to know who it was who had wandered this far up the shore.

It was Stephen Blaydon's voice that was speaking. By the time they could distinguish his words, he had apparently finished most of a sentence, but they could hear him distinctly say, "— get myself into a hell of a mess." And then Mrs. Herriot's sharp voice answered him. Ward stiffened as he heard it and he saw Nellie clench her fists, and a quick look of hate flashed into her eyes.

"There ain't a chance, if you handle it right," Mrs. Herriot said. "All you got to do is keep right on the way you're going."

"But, —— it all, Vi, Nellie's acting so all-fired uppish lately I'm afraid I can't handle her." Blaydon's voice was almost a whine.

"Well—" the widow's tone was one of finality — "you'll put this through or you won't get me. If I'm worth having, I'm worth doing this for."

"Aw, now, Vi!" Blaydon was wheedling.

"I mean it. You go through with it, and you can lead me right up to the nearest parson; but you get cold feet, and you can go to the devil as far as I'm concerned."

Their voices trailed off into meaningless sound as they strolled farther up the shore. Ward took an involuntary step after them with his fists clenched hard as though he intended an attack, but the girl beside him put her hand on his arm. Her touch brought him to his senses. He turned and looked at her.

Her face was as white as chalk, but there was no fear in her expression. Instead, her eyes met his in a steady gaze of calm and self-confident determination that showed that she was in complete possession of all her faculties.

"You must not follow," she said. "It would do no good. Let us go to the yacht."

He shrugged resignedly and, turning with her, walked silently at her side. Neither one spoke as they passed the tents and reached the side of *Caprice*.

He helped her up the steps to the deck and there she stopped and faced him, her hand held out in a gesture of openly declared friendship. He took it in his and pressed her fingers in sympathy.

"Thank you, my friend," she said. "I am going below to rest and think for a while. But I am going to accept one suggestion that you have made to me this morning."

"Which one is it?" Ward asked eagerly.

"I am going to ask you to have Mr. Conway and Mr. Greiner come at once to Sea View. I want to go over this whole case with you and with them. I shall then be in a position, I think, to tell you more about it than you know, and I shall ask you to prove whether you really meant that you would help, no matter what happens."

CHAPTER XII

THE TELEGRAM FROM GREINER

FENTON stood moodily looking down at his hand, still outstretched, as if he expected to see there the imprint of the warm fingers which had just been withdrawn from it. For some moments he remained motionless after she had gone. His brow was wrinkled with deep lines of thought and his lips were moving with words that he muttered to himself.

Gradually his eyes lifted from his hand and sought the trees along the inlet shore, traveling rapidly up the stretch of level sand to the knoll from which they had heard the voices that had so changed the aspect of their relations.

As his glance rested there, his outstretched hand clenched into a menacing fist, and the muttered words became an almost audible curse of the man whose wheedling tones had startled them so short a time before.

He took a step forward, planning in his rage a rush up the shore to confront the two, to demand of Stephen Blaydon satisfaction for the attack upon the aeroplane and some explanation of the double part he was playing in the mystery surrounding *Caprice*.

But he realized at once the uselessness of such a course. Stephen Blaydon would simply laugh at him. It would gain nothing; would, in fact, show the man that he was suspected and put him on his guard.

He shrugged in a gesture of helplessness and climbed down Carl's steps to the sand. Back among the tents, he flung himself into a chair, his eyes still fixed upon the shore of the cove.

Carl passed him and seemed about to speak. Then, with a second look at his chief, he smiled understandingly and went on about his work without a word. Fenton did not look like a man who wanted to have a pleasant conversation opened.

For nearly ten minutes he sat there without moving a muscle. Then the eyes which had been so steadily fixed upon the shore narrowed and glinted into a look of fierce hate as they saw the flash of sunlight upon the white dress of Mrs. Herriot. She came from behind the knoll, picking her way carefully along the bare shelf of sand that edged the water. Stephen Blaydon followed her.

Ward watched them closely as they made their way to the yacht. So far as he could see, they did not exchange a word. Apparently they had reached a thorough understanding and there was no further need for conversation.

Stephen Blaydon was scowling darkly. He looked like a man at enmity with all the world, himself included, and there was in his expression of ferocity something of cowardice as well, as though he were afraid of the things he was doing or about to do.

But upon the placid, fat face of Violet Herriot no such care made its mark. She looked, on the contrary, triumphant, happy, almost exultant. She was a woman flushed with victory.

Blaydon helped her in her ponderous climb up the steps to the deck of the yacht and both disappeared into the cabins. Then Ward rose and stretched himself.

"What's the use worrying?" he muttered. "She'll be harder to handle than a man like him, but we'll have to do the best we can."

He turned to enter his tent, but was stopped by Carl, who came out from his work about the aeroplane.

"Listen, Chief," said the mechanician, "I hear a motor. Up the shore—hear it?"

"Probably John Drummond," said Ward, straining his ears to catch the sound.

"No; this isn't an automobile, unless he's cut out his muffler. Sounds more like a motor-cycle."

Fenton heard it coming down the coast, growing rapidly in volume. Its reverberations were loud and distinct, beating a constant staccato that was almost a roar into the still air.

"Motor-cycle, sure," said Carl.

"Yes," Fenton agreed. "And coming in a hurry."

Soon they saw it below the line of trees, its rider bent low over the handle-bars, a great cloud of sand dust and burnt vapor swirling behind it. Up the beach it swung and, as it neared them, its rider straightened up in his seat and slowed down his engine. He dismounted at the tents.

"Couldn't help speeding on that smooth sand," he said, removing his goggles and advancing with a smile of delight. "Some speed boy, this machine of mine, ain't it?"

"It sure is," said Carl. "What's all the hurry?"

"I'm the telegraph operator at Sea View. Looking for Mr. Stephen Blaydon. He's here, ain't he?"

"Yes."

It was Carl who answered, but Ward immediately supplemented it with—

"How did you know he was here?"

"He stopped at the office before he left Sea View and said there might be a message for him. Found out I had a motor-cycle and said he'd give me five dollars to rush his messages down to him. Where can I find him?"

Ward turned to Carl.

"Take him to the yacht, Carl," he said quietly.

The mechanician led the man away and Ward went thoughtfully into his tent. Somehow he felt that this message was fraught with significance to both him and Nellie Blaydon, yet, so suspicious had he become of every one and everything about him, that he caught himself wondering whether it might not, after all, prove to be only another move in the game that Stephen Blaydon and Mrs. Herriot were playing.

Carl came back to him after a seemingly interminable wait. The mechanician entered slowly, his face wearing a puzzled frown.

"That operator's in the tent with the aeroplane," he explained. "He wanted to see it close to, so I told him to help himself. Say, Chief, there's something wrong."

"What is it?" Ward demanded.

"I don't know. I took this fellow to the yacht and called Mr. Blaydon. He came up on deck with the fat party that puffs so, and this fellow gave him the telegram. He ripped it open, read it and then jumped back the way they do in the movies, like this——"

Carl imitated an actor going through the business of being greatly upset by bad news.

"Then," he continued, "he handed the message to the fat lady and she read it and says, 'My God!' and falls back into a chair like she'd been shot."

"Well," urged Ward as Carl paused, "what happened next?"

"Then Blaydon gives her the once-over as if he's scared at the way she's carrying on. He says, 'Now, now, Vi,' like he was trying to comfort her and then peels a V from his bank-roll and hands it to the operator. 'I'll have an answer ready as soon as I 'tend to the lady,' he says. 'You go up to the tents and wait for it.' So the operator and me come up here. But it was rotten acting, Chief—honest."

"Acting?" Ward said interrogatively. "What makes you think it was acting? It might have been genuine bad news."

"Yes, it might. Also, it mightn't. I don't like this man Blaydon any more. I guess he's a crook all right, even if you haven't told me much about your clues. But I'm not taking much stock in him, and I'll believe it was acting until he proves different."

"Your friend, the operator, is to wait for the answer, then?"

"Yes. I thought you wouldn't mind if I gave him a bite of lunch before he goes back. It's getting late and he says he's hungry."

"By all means. I had intended sending a telegram myself to Mr. Conway, and his being here will save the bother of a trip to Sea View. Don't let him go until I see him. This message to Mr. Blaydon may change mine to Mr. Conway."

"All right, Chief. I'll entertain him in the other tent until you call me."

Ward went into his own tent and sat for a long time at the rough table, considering the wording of the summons he had promised to send to Phil. He knew that Conway would revolt at being called off of the New York end of the case, yet he felt certain that the conference that Nellie proposed would serve to clear up many points at present baffling them.

The element of secrecy was another thing that puzzled him. He knew the proneness of the small-town telegraph operator to talk, and, if he made his message too strongly sensational, this man of the motor-cycle would find it impossible to keep quiet about it, no matter how honest his intentions.

As he sat there, he heard the voice of Stephen Blaydon booming from the yacht.

"Oh, Loder!" Blaydon called. And when Carl answered, "Ask Mr. Fenton to come over here a few minutes, will you?"

Ward rose with a tensing of the muscles. He felt that he was about to face another crisis in the story of *Caprice*, and he made up his mind as he walked out of the tent that he would do the listening and let Blaydon do all of the talking.

The man was standing at the head of the steps as Ward approached. Standing behind him on the after-deck, straight and fine and regal, with her head held proudly erect and her splendid eyes showing a perfect self-control, was Nellie Blaydon.

"Oh, Fenton, that's good of you," Blaydon said by way of greeting as Ward climbed up to them. "I wanted to tell you some things that I didn't want those two fellows to overhear. That's why I asked for you to come here. I've had terrible news—terrible."

Ward murmured a word of unintelligible sympathy.

"It's knocked me out completely," Blaydon continued, "and poor Mrs. Herriot fainted dead away on the spot. She's below now, all broken up. I've got to take her right back to New York where she can get medical attention."

"I'm sorry," Ward said evenly. "Can I help in any way?"

"Yes; that's just it. That's why I wanted to talk to you. You see, my worst fears about my poor brother have been confirmed."

There was a catch in his voice as he spoke the last words, a suggestion of a sob choked back by a great effort at self-mastery. It brought to Ward's memory the declaration of Carl Loder that it was rotten acting. He wondered whether the mechanician could be right.

"The message that this fellow brought today," Blaydon continued, "was from Daniel Carter, a man employed on *Caprice* for many years as engineer, captain, quartermaster and general factotum. He was a confidential employee of my brother—had, in fact, been practically raised and educated by Otto."

"Yes," said Ward. "Miss Blaydon told me of him when I was in Baltimore."

"Carter and another man of the crew escaped when *Caprice* went down. My brother—" Stephen's voice sank to a solemn whisper—"drowned as they tried to save him."

Ward glanced involuntarily at the girl. She still stood where he had first seen her, in much the same pose. She gave no sign of the shock that such news might be expected to cause. There was not a hint of tears nor of heartache. Instead, she kept her fine eyes fixed upon her uncle in that same even, level gaze, glancing aside to meet Ward's look for an instant, but once more turning to Stephen Blaydon as though she were determined to let no shade of fleeting expression on his face escape her.

There was dignity and poise in every line of the splendidly erect figure. Even her hand, as it rested on the back of a chair, gave no hint of nervous tension. She was perfectly self-possessed, completely mistress of herself in this crisis.

Again the aviator murmured conventional words of sympathy as he saw that Stephen Blaydon was pausing for him to say something.

"Carter and another man," Blaydon continued, "drifted for days, clinging to a piece of driftwood until they landed on the coast. They made their way on foot to the nearest town, phoned Baltimore, found out I was here and immediately wired me. They must have landed away off from civilization, for it took them a long time to reach a town. I'm going to send them word to rush right to New York, for it puts me in a devilish lot of legal tangles—about the estate, you know—and they'll all have to be arranged there by Otto's lawyers. And I'm going to take Mrs. Herriot with me because she's gone all to pieces about it."

He paused and moistened his lips. There was a suspicion of sweat on his brow and he shifted uneasily from one foot to the other as though the steadily maintained silence of his two listeners was making him nervous. Once he glanced at Nellie and flushed darkly as he saw the unswerving gaze that she kept upon him.

"So I'm going to ask you to do something for me—for Nellie and all of us," he went on at length, his words coming more quickly and feverishly. "Nellie's acting splendidly—bearing up wonderfully, as you can see for yourself, but you know how it is with women. They beat us men all hollow when the first shock comes, but they cave in all of a sudden afterward. Sort of reaction, I suppose. I'm afraid Nellie'll be that way, though she assures me she won't. You'll stay right here with her, won't you? That's a good fellow. I'll appreciate it; in fact I'll make it a business proposition if you like."

Ward shook his head with a smile which he tried hard to make reassuring.

"There need be no business proposition," he said. "I have no flying engagements at present. I will stay with Miss Blaydon and do everything I can to help her." He turned to the girl. "No matter what happens," he added with a glance which he saw she understood.

"Oh, well now!" Stephen Blaydon again flushed and his tone took on its bluster once more. "Nothing's going to happen. Those beach-comber fellows won't bother you again. I'll take care to see to that as soon as I get to Sea View. And I'll probably send for Nellie to come to New York anyhow in a couple of days—as soon as I get the worst of the tangle straightened out. But just at present, it's better for her to stay here."

He paused again, waiting for Ward to answer, but, meeting once more the silence which made him so restive, cast another furtive glance at the girl, and the dark color mounted to his cheeks.

"I'll get Carl Loder to take us up to Sea View in the tender, if you don't mind," he resumed. "We couldn't stand the trip in your aeroplane, neither of us. You understand—the shock and all that. Sort of unnerves a fellow for that kind of thing. It's nice and smooth today and the tender will get us there before dark."

"Too bad Drummond isn't back with the automobile," said Fenton.

"Yes; by the way, he's gone a long time. Fancy your wire caught Conway out of town or something. Don't worry. I'll look Drummond up in Sea View and hunt up Phil when I get to New York. You won't mind sparing Carl for the rest of the day, will you?"

"Not at all. We are in need of supplies and he can do our marketing for us."

"Just what I was going to suggest myself. Nellie needs a lot of stuff, too. Nellie, you make out a list for Carl, will you, and I'll go on up to the tents and get this fellow to rush my answer to Carter. Devil of a mess, it is—devil of a mess!"

He went fuming down the steps to the sand, leaving them together on the deck. Ward watched him make his way up the shore and in among the trees, and then turned to the girl.

Apparently she had not moved. She still stood there, her steady eyes fixed on the broad back of her uncle, but now Ward thought he saw her lips curled in a look very like contempt. He took a step toward her, and the action roused her from her thoughts. In an instant her whole expression changed. She cast a quick glance at the cabins as though she had heard something, flashed him a look of warning and then said in the most natural tone imaginable, "It is very good of you to stay with me here, Mr. Fenton. I shall be bad company, I am afraid, for the shock of this awful news about my father has left me too numbed for clear thought."

As she spoke, she pointed to the cabin and made a gesture that told him as plainly as words that some one was listening to them. He nodded in quick understanding and replied in perfunctory words, to which she responded in the same manner.

But, as she was speaking, Ward tiptoed softly over the cabin-top and, reaching a point of vantage, glanced down through one of the windows in the trunk. What he saw made him straighten up again instantly. Mrs. Herriot was crouched below the window nearest Nellie Blaydon, her attitude one of tense listening. She could hear every word that was being spoken on the deck though she could not see the speakers.

He tiptoed back again cautiously, giving Nellie a nod that told her that her suspicions had been confirmed. The girl's eyes darkened with fine scorn, but the tone of her voice did not change so much as a shade to give the eavesdropper a hint of her emotion. Instead, she continued the conversation as if nothing had happened, enumerating the things that would be needed aboard the yacht for the next few days.

"But I had better give you a list," she said. "Wait a moment; I will write it. Have you a pencil?"

He took one from his pocket and handed it to her.

"LET me see," she mused, writing rapidly. "Butter — eggs—potatoes —flour, oh—" as if the thought of such material things were too much of a burden under her calamity—"you know the other things that are needed. I can not think of them now."

She rose and handed the paper to him.

"I must go below and rest," she said. "I must lie down for a while until I can think more clearly."

She paused and listened. From the cabin below they heard a rustling sound and then a door forward closed almost noiselessly. Again the girl's curved lips showed her contempt. She stepped toward him and held out her hand.

"Thank you—thank you!" she said tensely. Then pointing to the paper she had given him, she said, "Look over my list," and, turning, descended the companionway.

Ward opened the paper which he held in his hand. Instead of a list, it was a hastily scrawled message to him. It said:

> We must change our plans. Wire Mr. Greiner to watch them from the minute they reach New York. Come to the yacht as soon as they leave camp. I must talk with you.

He folded the paper tenderly and put it in his pocket. Somehow it seemed to breathe a note of close companionship with him, of an alliance between them more intimate and mutually dependent than anything she had yet done. It thrilled him with a sense of joy such as he had never felt in his relations with other women he had known.

He recalled the regal poise of this girl as she had stood there on the deck, listening to her uncle as he unfolded this story which Ward now felt to be a tissue of lies. She had not *demeaned* herself by any revelation of her suspicions; had, indeed, conducted herself under the circumstances in a way that had won his boundless admiration.

And her fine scorn as his nod had told her that Mrs. Herriot was eavesdropping in the cabin below them! As he recalled the steps by which Stephen Blaydon had led up to his excuse for leaving them alone, he saw now that it had been deliberately planned so that this woman could find out for herself whether he or Nellie had formed any suspicion that the story of the telegram from Carter was untrue.

And another conviction came to him with this one as he walked slowly toward the tents. Stephen Blaydon was not the type to lay any such shrewd trap as that. His mental processes were too cumbersome; his brain was not the clever brain of the conspirator. He was carrying out a plan made for him by a more devious type of intellect, and this intellect, Fenton now felt sure, belonged to the seemingly open and frank and honest widow Herriot.

He heard Blaydon again blustering as he reached the tents. From the man's words, Ward gathered that Carl was demurring at the task of carrying them to Sea View in the tender. He entered as Blaydon's voice boomed a threat to have Carl discharged if he refused.

"What is it, Carl?" he asked quietly.

"Why, Chief, Mr. Blaydon says I'm to take him and Mrs. Herriot to Sea View in the tender, and I told him my instructions would have to come from you. That's all."

"Very well," Ward said. "Consider that those instructions are from me. Is that what you want?"

"Yes, sir." Carl subsided, but his eyes gleamed at Stephen Blaydon with unmistakable hatred as he went about his tasks.

"Thank you, Fenton," said Blaydon. Then, turning to the operator, he held out a paper. "There's the answer," he said. "Rush it through as soon as you get back. I'll call at your office this evening to see if it brings a reply."

He stamped out toward the flap, but turned to Carl before passing through.

"We'll be ready in five minutes, Loder," he said. "If you keep me waiting, you'll get some instructions from me that you won't like. I'll break your dirty little carcass in half."

He left them before the mechanician could reply.

"Steady, Carl, steady!" Ward warned him. "I'm gathering the clues. Don't spoil them by your temper."

"You need not wait for me," he said, addressing himself to the operator. "I had intended sending a message to Mr. Conway in New York, but I think I shall have Carl call him up on long-distance instead."

"Mr. Conway?" the man asked, apparently puzzled. "You mean the Mr. Philip Conway who was with you all the time while you were giving your exhibitions at Sea View?"

"Yes; why?"

"Why, he's here, isn't he?"

"Here? No."

"Excuse me. I thought that message yesterday said he would arrive last night."

Ward stiffened suddenly.

"What message yesterday?" he demanded.

"Why that one for you. The one from Mr. Greener or Gainor or something like that in New York."

Fenton mastered the excitement that threatened to show in his eyes.

"Mr. Greiner, wasn't it?" he asked.

"Yes; that was it. Mr. Greiner. Didn't you get the message?"

"I haven't received it yet. To whom did you give it?"

"To that fellow who was with Mr. Conway's chauffeur. Big, dark, swarthy-looking man, he was—looked almost black. He said he came from here so I gave him the message because Mr. Conway's chauffeur was too drunk to sit up in the car. Gosh! I hope I haven't made a mistake. It might cost me my job."

"Oh, that's all right," Ward assured him easily. "I'm sorry John Drummond has gone on another spree. Pretty drunk, was he?"

"Yes; the big black man had to hold him up in the rear seat and another man drove the car."

"Well, they'll probably bring the message down when John sobers up. Was it important?"

"Let me see." The operator cudgeled his memory. "As I remember it, it was something like this: 'Received your wire to Conway. Conway left; should arrive Sea View 3:45 this P. M. Refuse to give up case.' "

Ward shrugged as if it were not of the slightest importance.

"Oh," he said, "is that all? Well, Mr. Conway is probably having a good time at one of the hotels before coming down here. But don't tell any one else anything about it, will you?"

"No, sir."

"Especially about John Drummond being drunk again. Mr. Conway wouldn't like it."

"Very well, sir. I'll go now, I guess. Good-by."

They watched him in silence as he mounted his machine and started off in a cloud of dust and gasoline vapor. Then Carl snapped his fingers.

"It's too much for me, Chief," he said. "I'm getting dizzy."

"It's another clue, Carl."

"I know. But I give up. I don't want to be a detective any more. You've got to think of too many things at once. It gives me a headache. Who is this black man he was talking about?"

"I haven't any more idea than you have."

"Well, do you believe John Drummond was as drunk as he says?"

"I happen to know that John Drummond never touched a drop of liquor in his life."

"Good Lord, Chief! What are we up against anyway?"

Ward scowled darkly and his fists clenched.

"I don't know, Carl," he said. "But somebody is likely to get hurt now. When they go for Mr. Conway, they go for me, and they've got to reckon with me, no matter who they are."

Carl's eyes flashed with excitement.

"Do you think that some one's after him?"

"Think?" Ward swung upon the mechanician almost threateningly. "Don't you see what has been done? This black man got the telegram intended for me and learned from it the train that Mr. Conway was coming in on. He had Mr. Conway's car and it would take a very simple story to say that John was sick and that I had sent the black man for Mr. Conway."

"Oh, gee!" Carl's tone was a long-drawn mixture of delight and terror. "I'm getting your point. You think——"

"I think that Mr. Conway was met by this black man and his pal," declared Ward. "I think that he was made a prisoner and I also think I know where he is likely to be at this very minute."

"Where? Near here?"

"No," Ward said. "Not near. But it can be reached by man or by woman in speed-boat or in aeroplane; and I propose to see that it is reached at once and that Mr. Conway is freed, no matter what fool promises I have made in my recent periods of insanity."

CHAPTER XIII

"HE HAS KILLED MY FATHER"

THE voice of Stephen Blaydon snarled an angry summons for Carl, and Fenton shrugged.

"Go see what he wants," he ordered. "But come back here before you start away with them. Is the tender all ready?"

"Yes, Chief. I filled the tank and overhauled her the day that guy came back from his fake fishing-trip."

"All right. I want you to change your attitude toward him, Carl. No matter how hard it is, you must be respectful and not let him suspect that you think him crooked. That is most important."

The mechanician left him and Ward paced up and down in the tent, hastily planning the best way to meet this predicament and struggling hard to overcome the wild desire for immediate revenge that almost swept him from his self-mastery. By the time Carl returned, he had schooled himself into comparative calm.

"Too lazy to carry his suit-cases to the tender!" the mechanician grunted by way of explanation.

"Now, listen, Carl," said Ward, "I'm going to tell you some of the things I have found out here, and I want you to make your memory of them absolutely accurate, for you must repeat them to Mr. Greiner over the long-distance 'phone just as soon as you can raise him from Sea View. Everything will depend on the clearness with which you present the case to him. You must not embellish it in the slightest with your fondness for melodramatic trimmings."

"I won't, Chief. Honest."

As briefly as he could, Ward outlined to the astonished mechanician the events that had led up to his discovery of the camp down the shore and the later ones that had convinced both him and Nellie Blaydon that her uncle and Mrs. Herriot were in a conspiracy fraught with the gravest consequences for the girl.

"I do not know who this dark, swarthy man is," Ward concluded. "He may be the third of the trio who attacked Mr. Conway here, but I doubt it. If he is so nearly black as to excite the attention of the telegraph operator, Mr. Conway would certainly have noticed him particularly and would have described him to me. It looks to me as though he were a newcomer and, if he is, it means that the cast of characters in this damnable affair is being lengthened. And that means that the plot is becoming more complicated and requiring more men to handle it."

"Do you want me to ask Mr. Greiner to come right down here?"

"No. You must find out first what train Blaydon and Mrs. Herriot take for the north and tell Mr. Greiner so that he can be on the lookout for them. Their first actions when they arrive north will probably be most significant ones, and if they feel that they are not watched, they will go ahead with their plans, and Greiner will find something definite to work on. Tell him, however, that you will get him on the 'phone again in the morning—make an appointment to do so—and, if possible, I will be with you. Then we can confer and decide on our next steps."

"Why don't you fly up to Sea View as soon as we start and get Mr. Greiner on the 'phone yourself? You could be back before we get there."

Ward's teeth clenched grimly.

"I have something more important to do," he said. "Besides, Blaydon might hear of my aeroplane being over Sea-View and it would make him suspicious and put him on his guard. That is the one thing I do not want."

Again the deep voice of the man they were discussing boomed from the yacht. Carl made a wry face of disgust as he heard it.

"There's my boss," he said. "I'll go."

It was with the greatest difficulty that Ward mastered his own loathing sufficiently to walk down to the yacht to bid them an apparently friendly good-by. Stephen Blaydon held out his hand. It felt big and flabby and damp as Ward took it, as though every pore of the man's body were oozing cold perspiration with his nervousness. His eyes, too, reflected his uneasy state of mind. They were shifting and restive and dropped constantly under the gaze of the aviator, though Blaydon evidently tried hard to keep them firm. His whole appearance served to convince Ward more than ever that this man was not the one to conceive and carry through such a plot as seemed to encompass *Caprice*, and that he was acting his part only because he was being constantly goaded on by another and stronger mind.

But the portly Mrs. Herriot exhibited no such signs of a disturbed conscience. She was ease and urbanity personified, as she came up to him and took his hand.

"Good-by, young man," she said heartily and with every evidence of cordial friendship. "It's likely to make an awful scandal —leaving you and Nellie alone like this without a chaperon in such a lonely place; but I don't see any way out of it. I'm too much broken up by things in general to stay here any longer, and besides, climbing these steps every day would be the death of me in no time. You just take good care of Nellie for a few days until Stephen sends for her, and then you put in a bill for your time and services and I'll see that Stephen pays it."

Ward sneered in spite of himself at the woman's crass vulgarity, but she did not appear to notice it.

"Good-by," she called, waving her hand to him and then to Nellie. "Stephen, you'll have to help me into that little boat mighty gingerly. I don't believe it's ever going to carry us all to Sea View alive."

Blaydon managed with considerable difficulty to get her safely seated in the stern, took his own place forward and gave the signal to Carl to start. The little engine sputtered as the mechanician threw it over, settled to its work and the craft shot out from the shore and headed down the cove toward the inlet and the open sea beyond.

THE two who had been left behind stood motionless and silent for a long time, watching it as it grew smaller and smaller with its increasing distance, and then Ward was brought to a sense of his surroundings by a sudden broken sigh that sounded almost like a sob from the girl. He turned and saw that she was on the verge of a breakdown. Great tears were welling up in her eyes and her lip trembled with a threat of an approaching storm of weeping.

She looked up at him in an unspoken appeal for support, but his heart was steeled to the task that confronted him and she saw at once that his eyes refused the comfort that she had evidently expected. It seemed to brace her with its shock. Her lip ceased its trembling and drew into a firmer line of self-control; the pathos in her brown eyes gave way to a quickly summoned look of dignity and firm resolve. In a moment, she had regained full command of herself and stood there facing him calmly and coolly, waiting for him to speak.

For the fraction of a second, he weakened. She was so fine and straight and womanly in her sudden sense of her aloneness. Her quick struggle with her collapsing faculties had been so hard and so bitter and yet so admirably successful, that he felt more than ever like a brute to desert her now, not only to desert her but to turn against her and to place himself among her enemies.

Involuntary words of sympathy and of comfort rushed to his lips. He felt the coldness in his eyes melting under the warmth of his desire to aid her, but the thought of Phil Conway came suddenly to him and nerved him for what he had to do.

"Miss Blaydon," he said, "I'm sorry, but I have found out some things that must alter our relations."

He expected to surprise her, to see again that look of startled fright that had marked her attitude in the first days of her stay on the shore. But her eyes did not falter as she looked at him. There was not the slightest weakening of the dignity of her pose. With the quick intuition of woman, she had evidently already sensed the unfriendliness of his feelings.

"Very well," she said quietly. "It is not necessary for you to stay here if you do not care to."

He frowned darkly.

"It is more necessary than ever," he declared. "In fact, it is necessary now, regardless of whether you wish it or not."

She raised her brows in mild surprise.

"Indeed?" she asked. "And am I to know these things that you have discovered—these things that have so changed your attitude toward me?"

There was a trace of bitterness in her tone that cut him and made him feel despicable.

"Yes," he said. "I intended to tell you. But I want to assure you that I am more sorry than I can say to have to withhold my sympathy from you in the position in which your uncle has left you. I should like——"

But she held up her hand and stopped him.

"I have asked for no sympathy," she said. "Let us dispose of your case first. What have you discovered that seems to involve me so unfavorably?"

"I have discovered—" he spoke very slowly, watching every play of her expression as she listened—"I have discovered that Mr. Conway has been trapped and carried away—kidnaped, to put it plainly. I have discovered that the people with whom you are on such friendly terms have intercepted telegrams intended for me——"

"Wait a moment, Mr. Fenton. Please."

Her tone was not peremptory, nor was there the slightest indication of anger in it. Instead, it seemed to reflect the puzzled frown that had gathered on her brow and the look of deep bewilderment in her eyes.

"Let me understand you perfectly in one thing at a time," she continued as he paused. "You say that Mr. Conway has been kidnaped?"

His anger at the trick that had been played upon his friend suddenly flamed up beyond control.

"Don't act as if you knew nothing about it!" he cried. "I am not trying to tell you that he has been carried off. You probably already knew that. I am only telling you that I have found it out and that you are to go with me at once and have him released."

This time she started violently. He looked at her keenly to catch every fleeting shade, but he could find in her astonished eyes no sign of the guilt that he had expected. They were bent upon him in a look that was one of complete surprise, almost of unbelief, but he searched in vain for the fear that he had anticipated.

"I'm sorry—really," she said, shaking her head in bewilderment. "I don't want to seem stupid, but I must ask you to repeat that. You say that I probably already knew of the kidnaping of Mr. Conway? Will you please tell me what could possibly have given you the impression that I have had the remotest connection with it?"

He glared at her a moment in silence. So surrounded had he been lately by assumptions of honesty that had proved dishonest, that he found himself wondering where she had learned to act so perfectly. Yet, as his eyes searched hers, he found himself convinced against his will that she was not playing a part to deceive him. He flushed under the even gaze that she kept fixed upon him.

"I do not mean—not exactly—that you are connected with it," he temporized. "I only mean that I have reason to believe that it was done by persons whom you know, persons whose activity since the discovery of *Caprice* has shown them to be unfriendly to Mr. Conway and me."

"Yes?" She raised her brows again, but her glance fell as if his words were an accusation that she could not refute.

"The persons," Ward continued, seeing her momentary embarrassment, "who are encamped on the shore below here—the persons whom you visited one night in a motor-boat from Sea View."

He could see her start with surprise at this thrust. The color fled from her cheeks but returned quickly again and she smiled bravely up at him.

"So you know that?" she asked. "I had intended telling you about it anyway. That was one of the things I thought we should discuss with Mr. Greiner. But are you certain that these persons are the ones who have captured Mr. Conway?"

"No," he admitted slowly. "I am not, absolutely. I have a description of one of the men. He is so swarthy as to be almost black. Doesn't that fit one of the men down there?"

She shook her head, a puzzled frown gathering over her eyes.

"Swarthy?" she asked. "No; there was no one there who was swarthy."

"You are sure?"

"Absolutely. At least, there was no such man there on the night you mention—the night I ran down in the launch I hired at Sea View. There were only three men there, and Uncle Stephen. None of them was dark. Are you certain of your description?"

"Quite. This dark man and another man, whom my informant could not describe, drugged John Drummond and, pretending that he was too drunk to drive the car, called at the telegraph office, got a message intended for me, telling me the train on which Mr. Conway was to arrive and then drove off. It is perfectly obvious to me that they met Mr. Conway at the train with some story that made him believe they were from me, that he entered the car expecting them to bring him down here, and that, as soon as they reached a place lonely enough for their purpose, they overpowered him and made him prisoner."

"And you judged from that—" her voice was more pained than angry—"that I must have had something to do with it, that I could play you such a trick after the way you have—have helped me? What can your opinion of me be to permit you to rush to such a conclusion?"

"I knew of this gang down the shore," he protested. "I knew that they had attacked us once and that that attack was prompted by our accidental discovery of *Caprice*. And I knew, unfortunately, that you were connected with this gang, for I followed you that night in my aeroplane and I was hidden in the underbrush not twenty feet from you when you and your uncle came from the tent down there and you started back for Sea View. I'd give my right hand not to have to suspect you, Miss Blaydon, for I promised—and meant every word of it, too—that I would help you here. But my friend comes first."

"You promised, you remember, no matter what happened."

There was a trace of wounded pride and bitterness in her tone. She seemed hurt, not so much by the things he accused her of, as by his defection from her side in this tangle.

"Yes," he admitted, "but I had not the remotest idea that it would involve my friendship for Phil Conway. I will stick by him, Miss Blaydon, first, last and all the time. A friendship like this comes only once in a man's life and it is too precious to be lightly cast aside."

She nodded slowly.

"Yes," she said. "I must agree with you and I admire you for your choice. It would, perhaps, be of little use to tell you that this misfortune, however, does not raise the question of such a decision. In other words, you would probably not believe me if I were to tell you that I have had no idea that Mr. Conway was to be molested in any way, that I have not the slightest inkling as to this dark man's identity; that this whole thing is as completely a surprise to me as it is to you."

His eyes searched hers deeply for some hidden sign of deception, but he found none.

"You are willing, then, to assure me that the men in this camp down the shore have had nothing to do with it?" he asked.

She hesitated, visibly perplexed.

"No," she said slowly. "I am not in a position to say that. You yourself have showed me a maze of lying and deceit about me that makes me uncertain of anything or anybody. I am so completely at a loss to understand Uncle Stephen's recent actions that I can not even guess what he may have done. I had hoped—" she faltered a moment and her lip trembled — "I had hoped that you would guide me."

The pathos of her voice went to his heart. It was an unintentional rebuke for his desertion of her in her need, and he felt it keenly.

"Miss Blaydon," he said slowly, "I hope you will not misunderstand me in what I have said. You must realize that, as a man, I must be true to my friend, and, when that friend is in danger, cast everything aside to go to his defense. You must realize that, in the light of the half-knowledge that I have about you and about those men down there, I can not be blamed for being brutal for my friend's sake. But if you assure me that you have had nothing to do with this attack upon him—that you did not even know it was to take place and that you can not imagine who has instigated it—then it assumes a very different aspect."

She smiled wanly, as if she were very tired.

"I *can* imagine who has instigated it," she said. "If Uncle Stephen and Mrs. Herriot are the fiends that you have led me to believe, I can easily imagine why they should want to get Mr. Conway out of the way."

"Then you think that they have planned it?"

"I do not know what to think. I am willing to do anything that you suggest to prove or disprove your suspicions of them, for I feel as though I should go mad with the thoughts that you have started in my mind."

He glanced up sharply.

"You are willing to do anything that I suggest?" he repeated.

Her eyes met his unflinchingly.

"Yes," she said impressively; "anything."

"Very well." His tone was quiet, as if her words had made his course easier for him. "I will ask you to get ready at once to fly with me down the shore to that camp, to enter it as if you were still on friendly terms with its occupants and to find out for me whether they have any information about Phil Conway. Will you do that?"

For a moment there was the merest hint of indecision in her look, but she conquered it.

"Yes," she said, "I will. I do not know what the result will be, for I am beginning to think that those men and Uncle Stephen are working together against me. If they are, my intrusion may have serious consequences for me, but rather than have you think that I have done the things you so evidently suspect, I will go."

"You need not be afraid," he assured her. "When you enter the camp, I shall be within a very few feet of you and the first man who raises a hand to touch you will die before he can take a step. I am a good shot and I shall be so close that a miss will be most unlikely."

She nodded confidently.

"I shall not be afraid," she said. "Shall we start at once?"

He gave her some directions as to what she should wear, and she went aboard the yacht while he hurried to the tent to overhaul the aeroplane. As he wheeled the big machine out and down the sandy slope to the waters of the cove, he found himself completely baffled at this new turn of affairs.

He had started with the firm determination to startle her into an admission that she knew something of the fate of his friend, to force her to go with him down the shore to insist that the men there set Phil at liberty. Now he found her accompanying him willingly, even eagerly, showing by her anxiety to solve the mystery and that she was in no way culpable.

With the machine in the water, he went back to the tents and slipped Carl's revolver into his pocket. His lips were closed in a grim line. He was determined now to go to the last extremity if he found either Phil or the girl in danger.

She came down to the shore with a self-reliant smile upon her beautiful face.

"I have had a battle with my timidity," she said, "and I have won. That is," she temporized, "I think I have won. But you must forgive me if I become frightened when we get very high. Shall we go very high?"

He shook his head with a reassuring smile.

"Only so high as is necessary for safety," he said. "I will come down lower when you tell me to. But I do not think you will. You will be fascinated with the wonderful sensations of flying two—three—four thousand feet above the earth."

She shuddered in feigned terror.

"Oh, please!" she cried. "You must not take me so high."

He understood her mood and humored her in it. It was evident that she had determined to thrust from her as far as possible the deeper fears of the tragedy that menaced her if her uncle should prove to be the scoundrel that Ward felt certain he was.

"Our flight today," he said, "will be for speed, not height. We must get there as quickly as possible."

"Oh, yes; and get our unpleasant duty over with. I had almost managed to make myself forget it."

He helped her into her seat in the hull and, with a final inspection of the machine, threw over the rear-starter and the roar of the Gnome reverberated through the air. He leaned over to her, his lips close to her ear.

"You need not be afraid of the engine," he shouted. "You will get used to the noise in a little while."

She smiled up with no show of timidity.

"I have sixty horse-power in my speedboat at home," she called. "It makes quite as much noise as this."

* * *

HE GUIDED the machine down the cove, listening carefully to the motor. Then, satisfied that it was working smoothly, he threw on more power and the hydro-aeroplane leaped forward, flinging up great sheets of white water from its blunt bow as it planed at ever-increasing speed.

With a final look at the girl to see that she was not frightened, he drew his wheel toward him and the machine, flinging itself free of the restraint of the water, lifted, sagged a moment, lifted again and then headed upward in a strong, steady climb. Nellie Blaydon leaned over to him, her eyes gleaming with delight.

"Why," she cried, "it does not seem as though we were rising at all. It seems as though the earth were sinking beneath us and we were fixed firmly in space."

He smiled at her enthusiasm. A little touch of healthy color had crept into each of her cheeks and her lips were parted as she breathed in deeply of the rushing air.

Slowly and almost imperceptibly, he kept the machine on its ascending angle, guiding it over the safe waters of the cove and turning at the inlet to head down the shore.

At slightly over five hundred feet high, he leveled out. It was not the best altitude for safety, but he did not want to be high enough for the men in the camp to see the machine over the tree-tops and, with the water so near, he felt that he could easily glide to its surface if the motor should stop. But the Gnome roared evenly and steadily without missing an explosion.

Soon he could see the break in the trees to the right that meant the head of the long cove where he had landed the night he had followed Nellie Blaydon—it seemed ages ago. He swerved over to it, headed down and, cutting off his spark, volplaned to the smooth waters inside. It was a matter of a few minutes only to work his way up until the keel of his hull grated on the sloping sand of the beach.

The girl beside him drew a deep breath of ecstasy.

"That was glorious!" she exclaimed. "Glorious! Some day, when things have brightened, when there are no troubles and no suspicions and no heartaches, I want you to take me for a long flight. And—" she glanced up with a sparkle in her eyes—"we must go high, much higher than we have been today. You plan for us to walk to the camp from here?"

"Yes," he said. "I think it wisest for them to believe you came down the shore by yourself in your boat and walked across the point of land between the sea and the cove. I shall hide where I hid the night I followed you. It is almost among the tents so that I shall be able to see and hear everything and you can be assured that not one of them shall lay an unfriendly hand on you."

"Then you want me to act as though I had come of my own volition—alone and unprepared to make any resistance if they should prove unfriendly?"

"I think it best. It may give you an unpleasant few minutes, but it is the only way to find out exactly what has been going on here and where they stand."

"And do you expect to find Mr. Conway here?"

He considered thoughtfully before answering.

"I do not believe we shall," he said finally. "My only hope is that these men, being, so far as I can see, in league against us, may know where he is. I must trust to your diplomacy to find that out."

"Very well," she said. Her voice was low and without a tremor, with a note that showed that she had steeled herself to meet any crisis that might be forced upon her. "Let us start."

They walked side by side in silence down the smooth beach. Suddenly she looked up at him, her cheeks flushing.

"Do you know," she said, "I think a friendship like yours for Mr. Conway is so wonderful."

He flushed in turn at the unconcealed admiration in her tone.

"Do you?" he asked. "Why?"

"It is so absolute, so unquestioning, so self-sacrificing. You have not even stopped to consider the possibilities of the position you are placing yourself in."

He laughed easily.

"Am I in such danger, then?" he demanded.

"If I were—what you practically accused me of being—" she hesitated over her words —"you would be in very grave danger. Suppose I should be in league with these men. Don't you see how easy it would be for me to give a silent signal to let them know that I was not alone, that there was some one concealed behind a bush or a tree or wherever it is you intend to hide yourself? And don't you see how easily they could surprise you and capture you before you could really tell what had happened?"

He looked at her with eyes that danced with amusement, but that shone also with the most absolute confidence in her.

"Thank you for warning me," he mocked. "You have put me on my guard. I shall look for your signals."

"No, but, seriously," she protested. "It is really very fine of you. I wonder if Philip Conway knows the value of your friendship."

"Oh, Phil is all right," he said.

"Yes; but he probably takes it all for granted as though it were no more than what is due him. I wish—" her voice became wistful—"I wish that my life had brought me such a friendship. I have never had any, except father's, and, of course, that is not quite the same."

"Oh, you never can tell," he laughed. "You do not know how many of your friends would rush to your assistance if they knew that you needed them."

But she shook her head sadly.

"They are all fair-weather friends," she declared. "And to think that, in the one crisis in my life, when I need help the most, I should have to look for it to a man who counts me as one of his enemies——"

"Stop!" he cried. "I lost my head, that was all. But you yourself admit that there was some justification."

She nodded prettily.

"I have been convicted through my associates," she said. "But we are going to make it all come out right in the end, aren't we? And everything will be explained."

"Yes," he said, a trifle grimly, "even the telephone trick."

She stopped short and stared at him. A slow flush mounted to her cheeks.

"The—the telephone trick?" she faltered.

"Yes," he said. "The telephone trick—in your alcove. When there wasn't any telephone there, you remember."

"Oh!" she cried in sudden shame, and again, "Oh!" The flush deepened and all of her self-confident poise deserted her. "Oh, you knew that, too?" she exclaimed, almost breathless with the horror of her discovery. "You knew that—all the time.

What must you have been thinking of me? Oh, I do not wonder that you have classed me——"

"There—there," he comforted her. "I have never taken it seriously—not lately, that is."

"But you must let me explain!" she cried, her words coming fast with the overwhelming tide of her self-accusation.

But he held up his hand to stop her.

"Some other time," he said. "We are almost at the camp now. We must get ready for our serious work."

The knoll behind which he had hidden on that other night loomed up a hundred yards below them, jutting out to the water's edge and completely hiding the land and the shore beyond it. He pointed to the left.

"You will have to go that way by yourself," he said. "The ocean shore is only a short distance. Walk straight toward it until you get on the beach, then on down the beach until you are about even with the camp and then strike inland again as though you had run your boat up on the sand and come to them on foot. You can say something about engine trouble forcing you to land. I shall be among the bushes on top of that knoll. If anything happens, be sure to get out of the line of my fire. For—" his lips drew into grim lines of determination—"I shall shoot to kill at the first man who tries to molest you."

She looked at him gratefully.

"Thank you," she said. "That is something like the friendship I have been wishing for, isn't it?"

She turned without another word and walked away from him in the direction in which he had pointed. He stood for several minutes watching her, his fists clenched as if he longed to fight for her, a boundless ardor glowing in his eyes.

She did not glance back at him as she threaded her way carefully and quietly among the low trees. She walked with the full swing that he had noted before with admiration, the lithe lines of her figure playing with perfect freedom and grace.

She turned at last and waved good-by as her path led down the slope to the beach and carried her out of his sight.

He shrugged as she disappeared.

"I'm being a fool again," he muttered. "It's time to get to work."

He struck out on his own course down the shore of the cove toward the knoll. The earth was soft and yielding under his feet and he moved silently, choosing his path to avoid the underbrush and the twigs that lay beneath it.

At the foot of the knoll, he paused, looking up with a disappointed frown upon his brow. The underbrush on top was not nearly so dense as he had hoped. The bushes were thin and far apart and offered little concealment for him in the bright glare of the afternoon sun. Hiding there in the darkness of the night was one thing; finding a refuge there now was quite another.

He studied his situation carefully, intentionally taking plenty of time, to give Nellie Blaydon an opportunity to finish her longer detour. Finally he decided upon skirting the knoll where it dropped precipitously to the water of the cove. He had scarcely turned to take this path when he was arrested by a cry from the direction of the camp. He stopped, electrified. It was Nellie Blaydon's voice.

"Oh, Mr. Fenton! Mr. Fenton!" she called. "Come quick."

He whipped the revolver from his pocket and, casting all caution and fear to the winds, plunged up the steep side of the knoll and rushed precipitately down its farther slope.

The girl was standing there staring at him. As he stopped in his mad rush and looked at her, she spread her arms out in a gesture that embraced the trees about her and the shore beyond.

He looked and understood. The camp was gone.

At her feet was a black mound that had been the embers of their many fires and behind her and beside her were the ditches where the tents had been, trenched to carry away the rain water. But tents and men and boat—all were gone.

He turned to her to express his own surprise, but the face that met his gaze stilled the words on his tongue. She had turned in the instant from the strong, self-reliant girl who had come down with him, to a haggard woman, appalled by the horror that she had stumbled upon. Her eyes were starting and staring with terror, her cheeks were ashen with the bloodless hue of death itself, her lips moved spasmodically as if they were striving to frame the words that her voice would not utter.

He stepped toward her and took her arm, for she seemed about to collapse completely. She flinched at his touch. Then the great eyes, so filled with fright, turned slowly to him. For a moment, she stared as though she did not know him. Gradually, however, some semblance of memory came into them and she clutched at his wrist convulsively, her feverish grip sinking into his flesh.

"Uncle Stephen has lied to me," she whispered hoarsely. "He has lied to me."

She turned again and stared at the remains of the camp about them. Then, with a choking cry, as the full realization of it all rushed upon her, she sank into a huddled heap upon the ground at his feet, burying her face in her hands as great sobs racked her body.

"Oh, oh!" she moaned. "What you said is true. He has killed my father!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE TRAIL OF THE CAMPERS

FENTON stood above her, too bewildered for any immediate action. Her words kept repeating themselves over and over again in his brain and, each time, he shuddered at the realization of what they meant.

They were almost the words that he had said to himself so often in the last few days. The terrible accusation that they conveyed was not by any means new to him; it was a conclusion that he himself had reached. But to hear them thus, faltered in the heart-rending whisper of this girl whose spirit they had broken, seemed to drive them home to him with a clearer, more personal, more horrible meaning.

He looked down at her fine head and shoulders, shaken by the violent sobbing that was becoming hysteria. She looked so childlike and helpless in her sudden weakness that he forgot she was a woman, forgot that her very nearness had set him aflame with his desire for her, forgot that he was a man, and she a girl of supreme allurements.

With low-spoken words of comfort, much as he would have crooned to a weeping child, he sank to the ground beside her and put a protecting arm about her shoulder, soothing her with his hand.

"No—no," he said. "You must not say such things. Your father has not been killed. I know it. You must not imagine such an awful thing."

She leaned to him, her head almost on his shoulder, her whole attitude one of seeking the protection of his strong body. Somehow the incongruity of their positions was lost in the overpowering agony of the girl.

He felt no hesitancy in pressing her to him comfortingly and she yielded as if it were the most natural thing in the world for her to do. The flesh of her shoulder felt firm and rounded under his hand, with a suggestion of vital life and nearness that might have shattered his self-mastery had conditions been different.

But he did not think of these things now. Her grief was too pitiful, too sacred for even a hint of his desire to obtrude, and he maintained his attitude of comforter, crooning to her almost as a mother would to a babe.

The violence of her sobs subsided under his ministrations. She still kept her face buried in her hands and her low moans of anguish wrung him to the heart, but he saw that she was regaining self-control, and in a few minutes more, her head lay quietly on his shoulder as if the agony of her grief had left her too exhausted to raise it. He waited patiently until he felt her stir. Then he gently released his arm and rose to his feet.

"You must not say such things," he repeated reprovingly. "I tell you, I know that you are wrong. Your father has not been killed. We are going to find him and save him—but you must get hold of yourself and not give 'way again, if you are to help."

She raised her anguished eyes to his.

"Do you think so?" she asked slowly. "Do you honestly think we can save him?"

"I know it," he lied emphatically. "Come now; you are all right again, aren't you?"

She smiled up at him wanly.

"I will—will try to be," she promised.

"Come then!" His tone was almost gay and he held out both hands to help her up. "Come then. We must hurry. There's much to be done!"

She put her hands in his and he raised her to her feet. With a sorry little grimace, she brushed the dust from her skirt and put her hands to her disarranged hair.

"I must look like a fright," she said. "I never broke down so completely in my life before. But—" she faltered again—"it all seemed to rush upon me with such overwhelming force that it simply swept me away."

She shuddered as the memory of it came to her. Then she drew in a deep breath and squared her shoulders.

"I am ready," she said in a firm voice. "You need not be afraid of such a scene again."

They skirted the knoll and came once more upon the cove shore.

"If you are tired," Ward said, "you can rest here and I will bring the machine down to you."

But she shook her head determinedly.

"No," she said. "I am not going to shirk my share of the work. I will walk."

They retraced their path along the shore in silence. Ward looked up at her once and her eyes met his. She flushed in embarrassment as if he had surprised her thoughts. He felt the blood creeping into his own cheeks as he realized what it meant. She had been thinking for the first time, of their position there by the embers of the campfire, his arm about her, her head resting confidingly upon his shoulder.

But the memory had not displeased her. Her smile, as her glance dropped, showed this. His fists clenched tightly as they swung by his side for the sudden rush of his long pent-up feelings threatened to sweep away all of his carefully maintained poise, and a flood of untimely words of passion clamored at his lips for utterance.

He dared not look up at her again. He could not trust himself to speak to her in even the most trivial way. He stumbled along at her side in silence and in silence they reached the machine where they had left it, its bow drawn well up on the sloping sand.

He was glad that the work of launching it and preparing it for flight kept him too busy for conversation. He even purposely found occupation on the opposite side of the hull as he saw her preparing to take her seat, for he was afraid to trust himself to take her hand to help her in. She seemed not to notice the slight for she, too, appeared preoccupied.

The Gnome roared out once more with the turn of the starter and they lifted from the water and wheeled northward. Ward kept his eyes steadily fixed ahead during the flight, his vibrant nerves warning him that he must not again subject them to strain without giving them the relief of the words that still crowded to his lips. Over and over, his brain seemed to cry out triumphantly, "You love her—you love her!" as if it had forced the admission from him after a bitter struggle.

And a bitter struggle it had been. In every way this girl seemed to be culpably involved in this tangle of crime and deception, and for this reason alone, he should have hated her.

Phil had warned him against this very folly with his laconic reference to the other suitors—all much better fitted financially and socially to be this woman's mate—who had failed to find favor in her eyes, and crafty Mrs. Herriot, skilled in the devious ways of life, had served notice upon him with her brusk frankness, that he was riding to a fall. His common sense told him that Phil and Mrs. Herriot were right, and he had definitely determined to profit by their advice and the results of his own observation.

Yet he loved her.

He clenched his jaws hard as he guided the machine. Of one thing he was determined. Under no circumstances would he allow a word of his folly to escape him. Under no consideration would he ruin their pleasant relations by a declaration which could only be regarded as presumptuous by her, and which would, of necessity, make any further friendship impossible.

Friendship! He sneered as the word occurred to him. She had asked him for it; he was planning to preserve it. Yet what did he want of this wonder-woman's mere friendship now? It sounded like mockery to him. It seemed to point the finger of scorn at him and tell him that that far he could go and no farther. Friendship!

HE BROUGHT the machine down clumsily to the waters of the cove below *Caprice*. It splashed badly as it struck and he cursed himself inwardly for this wreckage of his nerves. But the girl seemed not to notice it.

He could not avoid helping her to shore. The touch of her hand thrilled him more than it had ever done before, and he was conscious of a feeling of nervousness in her fingers. She withdrew her hand almost before she was safely on the land, and he glanced up quickly to see if she were angry at something, but her face was averted, and he saw only the flush in the contour of her cheek.

She stood at a little distance, waiting while he moored the machine.

"You are not going to put it away in the tent?" she asked.

"No," he said. "I am not altogether certain that I shall not need it again."

He saw her start and look at him anxiously.

"You are not thinking of going down there again—to hunt for them?" she asked.

"I am not sure. I think I shall wait until I see Carl. His talk with Greiner will influence me."

She turned away with a little shudder. From the corners of his eyes, he could see her pondering over some thought, as if she hesitated to express it. Finally she turned back to him.

"If you go," she said slowly, "will you let me go with you?"

He looked up in surprise.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because—because it is not right that you should face these dangers alone for me. I can not let you do it unless you let me bear my share."

"Very well," he said quietly. "If I go, I will at least talk it over with you beforehand."

"Do you know?" she asked in a new tone, "I have been thinking of something I saw down there, and I am just beginning to realize the significance of it. Did you notice that camp-fire?"

"No," he admitted in some surprise.

"The embers were still smoking," she said. "It was a tiny wisp of smoke that first showed me that I had left the path you pointed out to me and turned in straight for the camp."

His eyes lighted with a quick understanding of her meaning.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "Then they cooked their breakfast there this morning!"

"That was what I thought. I can not understand what it may portend. But I thought you ought to know because you are better able to think such things out than I am."

She put her hand to her head but took it away suddenly and he saw her fists clench as if she were fighting hard to overcome an attack of vertigo. Her violent grief of so short a time before had very evidently left her weak and unfitted to stand the strain of the fears that a further discussion would arouse, so he choked back the questions that came to his lips and spoke gently and reassuringly.

"I am sure everything is going to come out all right, Miss Blaydon," he said. "Take my advice; go to your state-room now and rest for an hour or so. I will call you after I have had time to consider everything thoroughly. But do not become nervous if you should hear my motor start. I think it likely that I shall fly up to Sea View to catch Carl and find out what Mr. Greiner has advised. The tender would not get him back here until long after dark. Go now and lie down, please."

Her brown eyes rested on him for a moment in a glance that made him grip himself hard again. It told of gratitude, of trust, of a sentiment of warm regard that set his blood to pulsing madly.

"Very well," she said. "I will do as I am told."

With a bright little smile and a nod, she left him and disappeared into the cabin of the yacht. Very slowly and thoughtfully, he walked up to his tent and sat down to figure out his problem undisturbed.

But, in whatever light he considered it, he became convinced that it would be folly to act without first hearing from Greiner. His own total ignorance of the many things which the detective and Phil must have discovered might lead him far astray and he determined to fly up to the resort before acting.

WITH a cup of hot coffee to strengthen him, he hurried down again to the shore to start the machine, but he had scarcely reached it before he became conscious of a faint, low buzzing sound coming from the north. His experienced ear told him at once what it was. It was the rapid pulsation of a gasoline motor, and a moment's listening convinced him that it came from the motorcycle ridden by the telegraph operator of Sea View.

He ran back to the tents and on down to the shore, straining every muscle, in his anxiety to see what had brought the talkative knight of the key to this distant camp again. Soon a cloud of dust whirled out from the bend up the shore and the machine darted forth, careening over at a dangerous angle as it swung at full speed around the curve, its rider bent over the bars. He saw Fenton and brought the machine to a stop twenty feet away.

Ward ran forward as the rider dismounted, but the aviator stopped in amazement even before the other had removed the concealing goggles.

"Carl!" Fenton exclaimed. "What the devil is the matter?"

The little mechanician paused long enough to get his breath and loosen his stifling collar.

"I had to hurry down, Chief," he said. "I've found out a lot of things I knew you'd want to know right away and I couldn't wait for that slow old tender to get me here. So I borrowed this machine from the telegraph operator. He didn't want to lend it to me at first until he found out I used to ride 'em in races. And I told him you'd pay him well."

"Yes, yes!" Ward agreed irritably. "Come to the point at once. What did Mr. Greiner have to say?"

"I couldn't get him."

"Couldn't get him? Then what the——"

"He wasn't at his club nor at his apartments. They said they hadn't seen him since last night."

"But, Carl, do you mean to say that you gave up so easily? Don't you know that it's most important——"

"Aw, Chief, I didn't give up. They said if he came back it would probably be around six-thirty, when he always dresses and goes to the club for dinner. So I told 'em both to hold him if he came in, and say it was a most important message from Mr. Conway and Mr. Fenton, and we'd call him up at six-forty-five, sharp. So you see, I did the best I could."

"All right," Ward agreed grudgingly. "I'll fly up to Sea View and call him up myself. I've got to talk to him. I've discovered things of the greatest importance."

Carl's eyes glistened.

"Gee!" he exclaimed. "Have you got more clues?"

"Yes. Those people in the camp down the shore have disappeared."

"Disappeared!"

"They evidently broke camp this morning. The embers of their fire were still smoking when Miss Blaydon and I got there."

"Where do you suppose they've gone?"

Ward considered the question thoughtfully a moment.

"I don't know, Carl," he said finally. "But if they will take such drastic steps to remove Mr. Conway, I imagine they would do the same to remove you and me."

"You think they're coming here?"

"I don't know what to think. But, as far as I can see, their plans—whatever they are—are rapidly coming to a head; and whatever they do now will probably be both sudden and desperate."

"But, Chief, if they wanted to remove you, why couldn't they have done it the night they tried to set fire to the tent?"

"Mr. Blaydon was here then. I fancy he didn't want it done in a way that might have involved him."

"Oh, good Lord! Speaking of him, I almost forgot my own clues. They didn't go to New York, Chief."

Ward started in astonishment.

"They didn't go—you mean Mr. Blaydon and Mrs. Herriot?"

"Yep. They didn't go to New York at all. They're up to something crooked, Chief, as sure as you're born!"

Ward made a gesture of impatience.

"For Heaven's sake, get on with your story!" he exclaimed. "Where did they go?"

"To Hackett's."

"Hackett's? Where or who is Hackett?"

"It's a one-horse little way-station down the line from Sea View toward South Junction. They bought tickets for there. That's how I found it out."

"You followed them?"

"Yes. You told me to find out what train they took and tell Mr. Greiner so he could meet them in New York. So I did it. You remember Jim Foster?"

"Foster? No."

"He's the ticket-agent at Sea View. He's the fellow used to come over to the camp so much in the evenings for me while we were flying there. He introduced me to a lot of the girls at the hotel—the maids you used to kid me about."

"Well?"

"Well, I went right to the station and renewed acquaintance with Jim. He invited me inside and I went and took a seat beside the ticket-window with my back to the wall so nobody could see me when they were buying tickets. And pretty soon I heard our friend's big voice with the fat lady's squeak butting in now and then. They were in the waiting-room."

"Could you hear what they were saying?"

"No, only the sound of their voices. But after a while, he comes up to the ticket-window and knocks and Jim goes to see what he wants. He says, 'Does this next train stop at Hackett's?' and Jim says, 'Yes, sir. It stops on signal or if there's any passengers with tickets for there.' 'Well,' the big stiff says, 'Give me two tickets for Hackett's.' So Jim gives them to him, and him and the fat lady goes out and sits on a bench at the far end of the platform, where they keeps up the argument out of any one's hearing. But it looked like some argument."

"Go ahead!" Ward exclaimed impatiently. "What did you do next?"

"I sneaked out of the ticket-office and around back of the station and come up on them just as though I had come from the hotel. 'I thought I'd say good-by,' I says sort of careless. 'I'm going on back to the camp.' I see Blaydon turning black, he's so mad, and he's about to tell me where to go when Cleopatra grabs him by the sleeve and gives him the high sign, while she says to me as sweet as sugar, 'Oh, ain't that nice of you. Won't you wait and see us off for New York?' "

Carl's imitative grimace was perfect, even to the venomous glint of his eyes.

"And I says, 'Yes, ma'am, thank you; I'll be that polite, though I ought to get back to camp.' Well, Chief, I wish you could have seen Blaydon at that. I thought he'd choke, honest."

"All right," Ward said bruskly. "So you stayed and saw them get on the train. Is that all?"

The mechanician looked injured.

"Ye—es," he admitted in a disappointed tone, "but I don't see what I did for you to get sore about, Chief."

"I'm not sore, Carl," Ward hastened to reassure him. "Only I am in a very great hurry. You have done splendid work. You'll make a great detective yet; see if you don't. But we require action now. Tell me exactly where Hackett's is."

Carl reached into his breast-pocket and drew out a printed pamphlet.

"Here's one of the hotel's folders," he said, turning the leaves. "It's got a map that shows it. Here it is."

He handed it to Ward, pointing with his finger to the spot where the little way-station lay on the railroad line from the resort to South Junction where tourists changed cars for the North.

"All right," Ward said. "I'll look this over. Meantime, you go to the yacht and get Miss Blaydon's maid. Tell her to call Miss Blaydon from her state-room and ask her to get ready to fly with me at once for Sea View. You are to take the maid on your motorcycle. I see you have an extra seat behind."

Carl flushed with pleasure.

"That won't make me mad," he said. "You think these fellows are getting ready to clean us up here?"

"It doesn't look unlike it. They are playing for tremendously big stakes and they are on the threshold of success. Mr. Conway and John Drummond knew too much for their safety. Therefore they have removed Mr. Conway and Drummond. You and Miss Blaydon and I know too much for their safety. You can draw your own conclusions."

Carl nodded.

"I see," he said. "Hackett's isn't so far away. They could get back here easy by tonight."

"Exactly," said Ward. "Go to the yacht and get them to hustle."

The mechanician hurried away and Ward went inside his tent, where he spread the map out on the rough table and began to study it. He had not been thus engaged long when he heard quick footsteps on the earth outside and Nellie Blaydon's voice called him. He went to the flap and met her.

Her rest, short as it had been, had evidently done her good. Her eyes were brighter and her step more springing, her whole carriage more erect and suggestive of freshness and strength.

"Carl tells me we are to fly at once to Sea View," she said as she entered the tent and took a seat at the table. "What is it?"

As briefly as possible, he outlined the discoveries that Carl had made.

"Here is Hackett's," he said, sitting beside her and pointing to the spot on the map. "You see, the railroad curves from Sea View well to the south to avoid this range of hills and then, where the range ends, sweeps sharply up northward again. Hackett's is at the southernmost point of this sweep. It is——"

He stopped suddenly as his fingers followed a line on the map below the little station they were discussing.

"Look," he said. "Do you see that line?"

She bent over and examined it closely.

"Yes," she said. "It is marked North Branch."

"It means a fair-sized creek," he explained. "In fact, I judge that it is quite a stream. Do you see where it empties?"

Again she bent over in a close study of the map. Then she drew back and looked at him with eyes that were full of quick understanding.

"It empties into the western branch of that cove where Carter had his camp," she said.

"And it means," he continued as if taking up the thread of her thought, "in all probability, that the tents were packed aboard their boat and they all ran together up the North Branch to this point here—" he indicated it on the map—"which is not more than five miles below Hackett's Station."

She drew a sharp breath of apprehension.

"Then," she said, "Uncle Stephen and Mrs. Herriot have left the train at Hackett's and have gone that five miles across country to the new camp that Carter has probably established on the North Branch?"

"That is my conclusion exactly."

"But—" she drew her brows together in a frown of bewilderment—"how could a woman of Mrs. Herriot's physique walk five miles across such uninhabited country as that probably is?"

He looked at her steadily for an instant and then said quietly—

"You forget Phil Conway's automobile."

She gave a little gasp of fright.

"Oh!" she cried. "You think they have taken him there?"

"It would not surprise me in the least. It looks to me as though this is the final rendezvous for the whole gang. I believe they are getting together to do whatever is left to be done, and I also believe that this camp is likely to have a sudden visit from them within twenty-four hours."

"An attack?"

He nodded grimly.

"We know too much for their safety," he reminded her. "They have not hesitated to remove a man as prominent as Mr. Conway. I do not think that they will hesitate at anything now. So we must go to Sea View at once for two reasons—they must not find us here, and we must talk to Mr. Greiner over the long-distance 'phone."

She rose calmly and her eyes did not betray the slightest sign of fear.

"Very well," she said quietly. "I can be ready in five minutes. I imagine I can take a grip along with my necessary things, can't I?"

"Certainly. And your maid can take one on the motorcycle."

She walked slowly over to the flap and paused there, turning to speak to him.

"When you talk to Mr. Greiner," she said finally, "will you let me be there? I want to know the very worst he has found out. I want to try to see just what this complex situation is that surrounds me."

"Certainly," Ward agreed. "I think it very probable that Mr. Greiner will want to ask you some questions about your part in the mystery. For you have played an important part, you know."

"Yes," she said. "But a perfectly innocent one—and I was absolutely in the dark as to its significance."

"You will answer Mr. Greiner's questions, then?"

"I will tell anything you or he wants to know. I have nothing to conceal now."

"Good. Then get ready as soon as you can, please, and we will be off. We may have to make another flight before the night is over."

"You mean——"

She started and stared at him with flushed cheeks and eyes that shone.

"I mean," he said, "to that new camp that these men have established on the North Branch below Hackett's Station."

CHAPTER XV

THE WIRE TO HACKETT'S

THEY let Carl and the pretty little maid start from the camp first. Speedy as was the motorcycle along the firm, smooth sand of the beach, the swift aëroplane would soon outstrip it in a race.

"I want you to get there some time ahead of us," Ward told the mechanician. "You are to go straight to the hotel, where Hedvig will engage rooms for Miss Blaydon and herself. You are then to get *Caprice's* tender and run across the inlet to our old camp on Long Point. That is where I shall land."

"Yes, sir," said Carl. "I can keep my promise to the telegraph operator, too, and return his motorcycle to him as soon as we get there. His office is in the basement of the hotel, you know."

"Yes," Ward said. "I remember it. You'd better start now and make the best speed you can without scaring Hedvig to death."

They left in a cloud of dust and amid a veritable thunder of explosions from the exhaust. Ward turned to Nellie, who was standing beside him, her grip at her feet.

"I will pack a few of my personal belongings," he said. "I must take my books and papers—business accounts and correspondence, you know."

She waited in silence while he went about his work and walked in silence beside him when he carried the two grips down to the shore of the cove where the aeroplane was moored. But her silence was not that of depression. It seemed rather to be a deep thoughtfulness, a serious realization of the gravity of the things they were doing and were about to do.

"Do you think," she asked at length, "that you will find it necessary to make that other flight tonight—that flight to the North Branch?"

He nodded slowly.

"I believe we will decide that it is necessary," he said. "I may not have to land. But it will at least, I think, be advisable to fly down in the darkness and satisfy myself that they are encamped there—or that they are not."

She stopped and looked at him reproachfully.

"Why do you say 'I' and 'myself'?" she demanded. "Do you think that I will let you go alone?"

"Oh, now, Miss Blaydon!" he cried. "You really must give up the idea of going down there with me."

"You promised I could," she reminded him.

"But that was before I found out how confoundedly desperate this thing is becoming."

Her level eyes did not falter at his suggestion of danger. Into them there crept slowly a look that he had not seen there before, an expression that once more sent his blood leaping and set his nerves tingling. It was the expression of a woman scorning to desert a man by whose side she belonged—at whose side she wanted to be, no matter what the peril.

"Very well," she said calmly, "that is the very reason you shall not go alone. I am going with you."

He shrugged hopelessly at the finality of her tone.

"We will talk about it later," he said. "Let us start now."

With the first lift of the big machine from the water, he headed it east, across the neck of land and out toward the open ocean, rising rapidly all the while. Soon they left the beach behind them, but not until they were a mile or more off shore did he swing the bow northward. She looked at him questioningly and he leaned over to her.

"I want to come in from the ocean side where few are likely to see us," he shouted in explanation. "If we flew up the cove, the whole town would know it and ask questions."

She nodded and settled herself comfortably in her seat. In ten minutes, they were opposite the inlet; in another five, he headed inshore. On a long, gradual descent, they volplaned to the inside shore, their motor cut off and their course taking them too low to be seen by any save the few loiterers who might be on the resort's docks.

It was the work of a few minutes only to bring the machine in to its old moorings on the sloping sand of Long Point, and he helped her to alight before hauling the bow well upshore.

"I see Carl coming," she told him while he was still at work. "Hedvig is not with him, so I suppose she has engaged rooms and is getting mine ready for me."

The mechanician landed in *Caprice's* tender and took charge of the aeroplane.

"You go right across, Chief," he said. "I've got another fellow coming for me later."

"All right," Ward answered. "Meanwhile, I want you to give the machine and engine a thorough overhauling and get enough gasoline to fill the tanks to capacity. I may have to make a long flight before the night is over."

They ran across the cove to the boat-landing and he took the grips while the girl walked quietly at his side. Hedvig was waiting for them in the hotel.

"I will go right to my room and try to make myself look a little more presentable," Nellie said to him as the maid took her valise. "But—" her voice sank to a whisper and she held him with her deep brown eyes—"you will promise not to do a thing without calling me?"

He nodded slowly.

"Yes," he agreed, "I will promise."

"And I can talk to Mr. Greiner with you over the 'phone?"

His eyes twinkled.

"Yes," he said, "and I will promise that there will actually be a 'phone there this time."

She flushed quickly.

"Oh, please!" she pleaded in a wounded tone. "You must not fling that up at me again until I have had a chance to go over this whole thing with you and make my confessions."

She bade him good-by with a pretty smile, though her eyes were still clouded with the film of worry that she was trying so bravely to fight down. He watched her get into the elevator and then took the stairs to the basement.

He sought the telegraph-office in one corner and found the talkative operator behind the counter.

"My mechanician tells me that we owe you something for the use of your motorcycle," Ward said.

"Oh, well, sir," the operator said, "whatever you think it was worth. My assistant tells me that Loder returned it while I was out just now."

Ward drew a bill from his pocketbook.

"Will that be enough?" he asked. The operator's eyes gleamed.

"Oh, that's more than I expected!" he exclaimed. "Thank you very much, Mr. Fenton."

Ward was about to turn away but the man leaned across the counter in an attitude of friendly sociability and said:

"Mr. Conway's gone over to Hackett's, hasn't he?"

Ward felt his whole body suddenly galvanized at the innocent question. The very name of the little station down the railroad, first brought to his knowledge by Carl in a most portentous connection, seemed to be a signal to him to be on his guard now, to feel his way carefully and not allow any hint of his surprise to stem the operator's natural loquacity.

"Oh, no; Mr. Conway is with me," he answered carelessly. "What made you thing he was at Hackett's?"

The operator looked puzzled.

"Why," he replied, "his message from Mr. Greiner was sent to Hackett's. If he's with you, he won't get it."

Ward snapped his fingers in an excellent imitation of impatience.

"Now that is rotten luck!" he exclaimed. "Mr. Conway waited for that message and finally gave it up and came on down to my camp. It came after all, did it?"

"Yes, sir; not more than an hour ago. I wish I had copied it now."

"But, if it was sent to Hackett's, how did you get hold of it?"

"Oh, we hear all the messages that go over this line. If I send a message from here, it is repeated on all the sounders along the line. But nobody bothers to copy it except the man I have called."

"I see," said Ward reflectively. "It is really too bad you did not copy this one. I don't see how I am going to get word of it to Mr. Conway now, and he was most anxious to hear from Mr. Greiner."

"Well, now; let me see." The operator wrinkled his brows in deep thought. "Maybe I can recollect it. It's against the rules for me to give out a message this way, but, of course, knowing both of you, it will be all right. And you'll get Mr. Conway to go to Hackett's as soon as he can and have it delivered to him in the regular way, won't you?"

"Oh, certainly." Ward was holding himself in check with the greatest difficulty.

"Well, now," the man continued, "It was about like this. It began, 'O. K.' I remember noticing that particular because it showed that Mr. Conway had sent him a message and I wondered why he had been to an out-of-the-way place like Hackett's."

He paused for Ward to answer. It was practically a question and the aviator realized at once that this village gossip expected to learn all about the case in return for the information he was giving.

"He thought he might be able to pick up a cheap place to build a hunting shack," he lied glibly. "But he couldn't find what he wanted."

"Well, now," said the operator, "hunting's pretty good down there in season. He'd oughtn't to give up so easy. But about the message. It says, 'O. K. Starting at once' or 'leaving immediately' or something of that sort, and then, 'Will arrive Hackett's on last train from South Junction.' That was all. It was signed 'Greiner.' I remember that was the name you told me when I was down to your camp.

By the way, you got that message all right, didn't you?"

"Oh, yes," Ward said easily. "Thanks very much. Drummond was on quite a spree that time. I'm glad you gave it to the other man."

He nodded gratefully to the gossip and moved away in as leisurely a manner as he could assume. But his mind was far from at rest. In it there swirled a veritable maelstrom of fears, thoughts and conjectures. Once out of sight of the man behind the telegraph-office counter, he hurried up the broad stairs to the office and asked for Miss Blaydon's room on the house 'phone. She answered almost immediately.

"Can you come down at once?" he asked.

SHE came from the elevator, a vision of loveliness that made the whole inner man of him cry out for her. Her eyes found him at once and he saw that they were bright with anxious expectancy and that the fear in their brown depths was glowing again.

"What is it?" she asked in a low whisper, putting her hand on his arm and coming up close to him. "Is it bad news?"

"I can not tell, yet," he answered. "Let us go over to that window-seat where we will not be overheard."

He found cushions for her in a deep alcove in the wall and, taking a chair in front of her, leaned forward so that he was almost touching her. As calmly as he could, he told her of his conversation with the telegraph operator and she listened breathlessly, her lips parted, her beautiful eyes fixed steadily upon his in sympathetic understanding as he talked.

"And you think," she said as he concluded, "that the message which was apparently sent from Mr. Conway to Mr. Greiner was a decoy?"

He nodded moodily.

"Worse than that," he said. "It must have been sent by the men who have Phil in their clutches and who have found Greiner's address among his things. And it makes me certain that his capture was not an isolated crime, but was a part of this whole plot. Otherwise, his captors could have no interest in Greiner. There is no reason why they should even know that he exists."

"Part of this whole plot!" she repeated thoughtfully. Then, her whole bearing reflecting the most boundless faith in him, she leaned forward and put her hand upon his. "Tell me something frankly and honestly, Mr. Fenton," she said, her brave eyes fixed upon his. "You need not fear that I shall break down for I have quite prepared myself for it. You believe my father has been killed, do you not?"

He tried for a moment to evade her eyes, but they held him in spite of himself. Very slowly and sorrowfully he nodded his head.

"Yes," he said softly, "I do."

Her hand clutched his with a little convulsive grip and she drew a sharp breath of pain, but that was all.

"I thought so," she said. "Thank you for not hiding the truth from me longer."

She sat in silence for a long time, her gaze fixed upon the floor in front of her. Finally she sighed and looked up.

"Then," she said, "there is no time for grief now. Only one thing remains for me to do—to find out who has done this thing and why. You will help me?"

The brown eyes challenged him and he met them unflinchingly.

"I will help you," he said simply.

"You will be in danger," she reminded him.

"I will help you," he repeated.

"They will try to—to—remove you, too."

"Nevertheless, I will help you."

A mist of unshed tears veiled the grateful eyes.

"Thank you," she said in a voice so low as to be scarcely audible. "Thank you."

There was another interval of silence and then she squared her shoulders with determination.

"Then we must act at once," she said. "What had you planned to do?"

He welcomed the quick change in her attitude. He had been writhing under the torture of her pleading eyes. He felt that in another moment, the flood gates of his passion would give way and that the whole long pent-up torrent of ardent words would rush forth in a deluge that would carry him away completely from his self-control.

He had longed to seize her bodily in his arms and crush her to him in the strong protection of his embrace.

But her quick change of attitude had saved him. It brought his thoughts sharply from his own longings to the actualities that surrounded them.

"Do you believe this telegram genuine?" she continued.

He looked at her admiringly.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "That was something I had not thought of. I see what you mean. It may be only another lure or trick of theirs?"

"It is worth considering," she said. "If Greiner's telegram to Mr. Conway is genuine, then the message to him signed by Mr. Conway and evidently urging him to come down here at once was probably the trick one."

"That is more likely," Ward said after a moment's thought. "I believe I can see how this is all working out. Phil knew too much and they have got him. You and Carl and I know too much; they planned to get us and probably are hoping to succeed now that we are supposed to be isolated down the shore. The only other man who knows too much——"

She nodded excitedly.

"Is Greiner," she finished for him. "So they are luring him down into that inaccessible country around Hackett's where they have established their new headquarters and there they will——"

She shuddered at the thought that her reasoning had conjured up.

"Oh, it grows more and more horrible!" she cried. "I did not believe there were such fiends in the world."

"They will stop at nothing," Ward said between grimly set teeth. "They are playing for big stakes, I suppose—" He paused and looked at her with a puzzled knitting of his brows. "Miss Blaydon," he asked, "do you know anything about your father's will—how it will provide for your Uncle Stephen, I mean?"

She started and looked up at him in horror.

"I understand what you mean," she said. "I do not know much about it. Father has, of course, mentioned the subject to me several times. It was his intention to divide the estate between us evenly. Much as he disliked Uncle Stephen's mode of life and lack of business ambition, he did not feel that he had any right to leave grandfather's money outside of the family."

"His death, then, would leave your uncle a wealthy man?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Several millions, I imagine."

"Yes."

"And as things have been, he has had nothing?"

"Nothing except the allowance that father has always given him. It was enough to keep him comfortably, but not enough to let him get himself into trouble."

"I see," Ward muttered. "Then I should say that the stakes are well worth her playing for."

"Her?" The girl's tone was both an exclamation and a question.

"Yes," said Ward with a sneer. "The 'her' being, of course, the sprightly Mrs. Herriot."

She nodded slowly while a frown of deep disgust gathered on her forehead.

"Of course," she agreed. "I had forgotten what we overheard down there on the shore. She is just Uncle Stephen's style and she evidently has him completely under her control."

He rose suddenly to his feet.

"We must act at once," he said. "The first thing to be done is to prove whether Greiner's telegram is genuine. If it is, it means that he is coming down here to his own death. We must save him. Whether it is or not, it means that Phil Conway is or was, near Hackett's and we must save him—if it is not too late."

She put out her hand in quick sympathy.

"You were fond of him, weren't you?" she asked softly.

He clenched his fists as he turned his burning eyes to her.

"I cared more for him than any one in the world," he said and then added, "except one."

A quick flash of pain came into her eyes and he saw her catch her breath.

"There is another, then?" she asked, very low.

"Yes." His voice was almost a whisper and it shook with suppressed passion. "There is another now. There was not a week ago."

He saw the quick color spring up to her cheeks, but the pain fled from her eyes and she rose nervously.

"We must find out about that telegram," she reminded him gently. "How are you going to do it?"

It was not a rebuff. Oversensitive as he has become with the deep brooding over his foolhardy love, he would quickly have sensed any tone of reproval in her words, but there was none. His blood pulsed feverishly as he realized it. She must have known what he meant. Yet she was not unwilling to hear it. He saw the nervous clasping of her hands and the lines that her sorrow had left upon her, and again he cursed himself inwardly for even hinting at his own feelings when she was undergoing such torture of spirit. He fell in with her new mood at once.

"We can find out by long-distance 'phone," he said. "I will call up Greiner's apartments. They will know whether he has left. He could not have come down here without putting at least a few things in a grip, and his man will be able to tell me."

She went with him down the broad stairs to the basement where the 'phone booths and exchange were located. Carl came in while they were waiting at the desk, and Ward, taking him aside out of ear-shot of the girl in charge, explained to him briefly his discovery of Greiner's telegram and his fears of what it meant. The mechanician listened soberly. His wonted gleam of pleasurable excitement was gone.

"Gee, Chief!" he said. "It's getting close, isn't it? I can easy see that we're next."

"I am glad you realize it," Ward said. "I thought you ought to have this opportunity to duck while there is time. You can get a train in an hour and make connections at the junction for New York or wherever you want to go. I will give you what money you need."

Carl turned upon him a pair of eyes in which he saw anger burning for the first time.

"There's no reason why we should talk about it any more," Carl said impatiently. "I'm going to stick with you whether you like it or not. Now if you want to fire me, fire and be ——, but I'll be with you when they come for you, and they'll have to get me first."

Ward choked back a lump that persisted in rising in his own throat as he saw how he had wounded the mechanician.

"Come here, Carl," he said and laid his arm gently across Loder's back. "I ought not to let you do it, but I suppose I shall have to. I won't tell you how much I appreciate your spirit. Some day, if we get out of this all right, I will. But at present, there is work for both of us and, if you want to stick and face it, we'll fight side by side. Is that satisfactory?"

"Yes," said Carl grudgingly. "That's what we were going to do anyhow, whether it was satisfactory or not; but you needn't have tried to give me my walking papers. What do you want me to do?"

"I don't know yet. Wait until I talk to New York. The girl is calling me now."

He entered the booth to which the operator directed him and talked for several minutes. When he finally emerged, the frown of anxious thought on his brow told its own story. Nellie and Carl stood waiting at a safe distance from the listening girl and he joined them at once.

"The telegram was evidently genuine," he said. "I talked to Greiner's man. Greiner left early this morning, saying he was going south for a few days to see Mr. Conway on important business."

Nellie Blaydon gave a gasp of horror.

"He is coming to his death!" she exclaimed.

"They'll be there at Hackett's to meet him," said Carl. "They'll say they are from Mr. Conway, sent to take him to him and they'll lead him in there among the woods and the mountains and that will be the end. Boss, you let me take care of the Greiner end of this thing, will you? You've got your hands full now if you're going to make that flight tonight."

Ward nodded slowly.

"I believe that will be the best division of the work," he agreed. "I must locate the camp of these other men. Once we know definitely where they are, we can make arrangements to round them up."

"Why can not we get the authorities to go with us tonight?" the girl demanded. "Why do you have to subject yourself to such risks alone?"

But Ward shook his head.

"You forget," he reminded her. "There is not a single definite charge that we can bring against these men; not a valid reason that we could give the authorities for interfering."

"They have murdered my father," she said bitterly, the great tears welling up into her eyes.

"Yes," Ward agreed gently. "You and I know that, but we can not furnish the one thing most necessary before we can claim the help of the law."

"What is that?" she asked.

"Legal proof that your father is dead," he said. "Nothing can be done until we get that. I believe Greiner has it. That is why I want Carl to meet him and explain the whole situation while we locate their camp, so that whatever Greiner sees best to do can be done without uncertainty as to their whereabouts."

She nodded her approval.

"Very well," she said. "Tell Carl what he is to do and we will get ready for our flight. For—" she turned to him, her eyes deep with concern for his safety—"I am going with you—or I shall not let you go at all."

CHAPTER XVI

THE CAMP ON THE BRANCH

THEY found time-tables in the reading-room and sat down to consult them and to make final arrangements for the momentous evening.

"I can get a train for the Junction at six," said Carl. "It will get me there at seven. There are two trains down from the North after that—one getting to the Junction at eight-forty and one at ten-twenty. Mr. Greiner may be on either one, but it will probably be the ten-twenty. That will give us an hour to do whatever is to be done and get the last train for Hackett's."

"But you do not know Mr. Greiner," the girl objected. "How are you going to find him."

Carl gave her a look that expressed supreme confidence in his own ability as a detective.

"I'll watch the people that get off the train from the North," he said. "If they belong at the Junction, they'll go on about their business without asking any questions. But a man coming down like Mr. Greiner for the first time will be sure to go to the ticket-window to find out about trains or where he can get a bite to eat or something. And it's more than likely that he'll have his initials on his grip. All men that travel much do."

"You see," Ward explained with an indulgent smile, "Carl hopes to be a detective himself some day and he has made a careful study of the methods and systems of all of the leaders of his profession."

Carl flushed at the tone of raillery.

"All right," he maintained stoutly. "I'll bet you next week's salary that I spot him first shot and don't make a mistake."

"There is one thing," Nellie said after a moment's hesitation, "that I must speak of, though I dislike discussing money matters. Mr. Greiner must understand that no consideration of expense is to enter into the plans that he feels it necessary to make. Tell him that I personally want to retain him if it will not interfere with his agreement with Mr. Conway. Before you go, Carl, I will give you a check for any sum that Mr. Fenton decides is necessary to cover the investigation."

"I think we might very well leave that matter until the whole thing is over," said Ward. "If you instruct Mr. Greiner to go ahead on his own plans and assure him that you will be responsible for the expenses, that will be perfectly satisfactory to him. When his work is done, he will send you a bill and you can settle then."

"You forget," she said softly. "You and I do not know what is going to happen tonight. We may not return."

There was not a trace of fear nor of timidity in her words. She spoke seriously and gravely, but without a hint of trepidation. He nodded in the same mood.

"You are right," he agreed slowly.

"Then I will go up to my room and write the check. Shall I make it a thousand dollars? Will that be enough?"

"Oh, half of that," cried Ward, but his heart sank at the ease with which she spoke of such a sum. It seemed to place her so far beyond his reach.

When she had left them, Ward turned to Carl again.

"Go and get a bite to eat," he ordered. "You have no time to spare. And make it a good, big bite, too, for I don't know when nor where you will get another one."

Alone with his own thoughts, he cast about for some way by which he could induce Nellie Blaydon not to insist upon accompanying him on the flight that night. He knew that the mere spotting of a campfire's glow from a height of several thousand feet would prove nothing; it would be only a signal for a descent and the still more difficult and dangerous work of creeping up through the shadows of the night until those about the blaze should be sufficiently clear to his vision for him to identify them positively.

He did not want the girl to face these dangers. The men with whom they had to deal had already proved themselves desperate and determined enough to stop at nothing, and he knew that a captured spy would have short shrift with them.

But his first words to her when she returned showed him the hopelessness of attempting to dissuade her.

"If I can not go, then you shall not go without me," she declared positively.

"It is absolutely essential that some one go," he remonstrated. "It seems to me that these people are ready for their final blow before dispersing, and unless they are located tonight, the difficulties of ever finding them will be multiplied a thousand times. I must go."

"Yes," she agreed. "You must. And so must I."

He shrugged at the uselessness of further argument.

They bade Carl good-by as he left for the railroad station and then had their own dinner together. It was a meal filled with delight for Ward in spite of the grave business that they had in hand. Something in the unconscious suggestion of intimacy in her pose as she faced him across the table, in the atmosphere of lives linked by their daily habits, thrilled him with a sense of what the winning of this woman would mean to him.

They left the hotel together as the sun was setting. It was but a short walk to the dock where they had left the tender, and in ten minutes they had landed on the lonely shore of Long Point, where the flying-boat was hauled well up from the water's edge.

"We can not start until dark," he said. "It looks as though conditions would be ideal for our purpose. There are clouds gathering to obscure the stars and there will be no moon."

She shuddered at his words.

"The last time there was a moon—do you remember?" she asked.

"Perfectly. Thank Heaven that conditions are different now."

"Yes," she murmured; "different, oh, so very, very different! How you must have despised me!"

"I tried my best to hate you," he admitted frankly, and added with a tremor of deep emotion in his voice, "but I could not, even then."

Again she seemed to sense the torrent of passion that he was holding back, for she walked over to the aeroplane.

"Is the machine all ready for its work?" she asked.

"Carl can be trusted implicitly," he replied, glad that she had once more so gently led him away from dangerous ground. "We can start in a few minutes now."

He wheeled the machine down to the lapping waters, and as the shadows thickened about them and the lights from the village across the cove began to twinkle in the darkness, he helped her into her seat and they were soon afloat.

"We are going high," he warned her. "We must fly at an altitude which will make the sound of the motor inaudible from the ground. We do not want to attract their attention."

"But how can you locate them from such a height?" she asked.

He explained to her briefly the principles on which machines can be made to volplane without the power of their motors, getting their speed entirely from the force of gravity.

"We can volplane, or glide, at least five times as far as we are high," he said. "I plan to reach Hackett's at well over a mile up, cut off the motor and volplane on a long angle toward the spot where I believe they have pitched their camp on the shore of the North Branch. We shall make no sound during this volplane except the whistling of our wires and the machine itself as it cuts through the air, but that can not be heard very far.

"I believe we shall locate the fire on the first volplane. If not, we will continue to glide until we are sufficiently far from the camp, start the motor again and climb for another attempt."

He took a final look at the black heavens overhead.

"Fine," he said. "It is as dark as a hat. They could not see us tonight even if they did happen to hear the motor. We will start now."

He threw the rear starter over and the big Gnome thundered its response, speeding up at once to the full power of a perfectly working engine. The machine fairly leaped forward over the water. They raised in a shower of phosphorescent spray and climbed in a wide circle over the narrow land-spit of Long Point.

As they rose farther and farther into the heavens, earth and sea and the waters of the cove melted from their view, all merged together into one great expanse of impenetrable black. From two thousand feet, they seemed to be looking over the very edge of space into a bottomless void below, without a detail save now and then, as they circled, a dim glow that came from the electric lights of the resort they had left.

Ward turned the rays of his little pocket flash-lamp upon the dial of his altimeter every now and then, watching the needle slowly crawling around as they rose higher and higher. When it marked four thousand feet, he headed southwest toward the lonely railroad station at the foot of the range of hills that had so suddenly become the very center of all the hopes and desires of his life.

The girl beside him did not stir during the flight. Once or twice he glanced at her before snapping out his light after an altimeter reading, but she did not even look up. Her eyes were fixed into the darkness straight ahead, calm and undisturbed, but deep with an expression of brooding thoughtfulness.

He felt the magic of the night creep upon him and the greater magic of her nearness to him; he was almost tempted to reach out and touch the edge of her dress as she sat close to him.

With every turn of the propeller, he had a growing sense of drawing nearer and nearer to the end of this association which had come to mean so much to him. Whatever the outcome of this flight tonight, it seemed doomed to write "Finis" in large letters across the only love for woman that he had ever known.

The whole story of *Caprice* seemed now focussed upon that narrow stretch of land between Hackett's Station and the camp on the North Branch, and no matter what the climax should prove to be, it seemed certain that it would make him no longer necessary to this girl—that it would take away from him the precious privilege of seeing her constantly, of talking with her, of watching the play of light and shade in the brown eyes as they sought his, of touching the firm fingers in the clasp of fellowship.

IN THE inky blackness below them to the west, he suddenly made out a thin finger of white light crawling southward. A moment's inspection showed him that it was the headlight of a locomotive, a train from the Junction heading for Hackett's before swinging around the curve at the foot of the hills and thence heading up for Sea View.

He welcomed it gladly, for he was trying to locate his turning-point entirely by stop-watch and a knowledge of his own speed. Now he circled easily, waiting for the train to stop at the station and then resume its way northeast.

In a few minutes, he saw that the finger of light was no longer moving; then, again, it went ahead, swinging about slowly until it was pointing toward the resort that they had left. It gave him his bearings accurately. He glanced again at his altimeter, saw that they were well above five thousand feet, headed due south, dived and cut off his motor.

The girl stirred as the thunder of the engine ceased. He did not speak to her until he had guided the machine to its slowest safe angle; then he looked toward her and called:

"Keep a sharp lookout below for the camp-fire. We ought to be over it in four or five minutes."

She was the first to discover it. It lay far below them, a tiny dot of light, like a dim star reflected from the abyss on her side of the machine, but with a descent of two circles at a steeper angle, he saw it clearly enough to be certain that it was the beacon they sought.

It was impossible at first to distinguish the water of the North Branch in the dense darkness that surrounded it. He located it finally by gliding to the south and picking out the reflection of the blaze upon the surface of the stream.

Nearly a mile below the camp, Ward brought the machine down to the water as lightly as a bird. The stream was amply wide for it and it was evident that it had depth enough to make it an ideal water course for the speed-boat that Carter and his crowd were using.

He helped the girl climb over the bow to the shore and the firm touch of her fingers showed that she was not even slightly nervous. She drew a deep breath of the fresh night air and joined him, in spite of his protests, in hauling the bow of the machine well up on the shore. He made one final effort to induce her to let him carry out the rest of the task alone.

"It will be perfectly useless for you to go to the camp with me," he argued, but she interrupted him with, "Yes, and perfectly useless for you to attempt to go without me. I am not going to let you run the risk alone. You see, I am an obstinate and unreasonable young person when I once make up my mind."

"But those men are desperate," he protested.

She put her hand into the pocket of her auto-coat and drew out a serviceable-looking revolver which gleamed even in the darkness.

"And so am I desperate," she declared. "I am going to extremes tonight and I am prepared for anything they may do."

Again he shrugged at the hopelessness of trying to keep her back.

"Very well," he agreed reluctantly. "We will start. But we must go very slowly and not make even the slightest sound."

The shore along the stream could not have been better for their purpose. It was smooth and sloping and carpeted with soft sand that gave springily under their feet and made their steps inaudible. They crept along the eastern bank, keeping as far in toward the trees as the sand extended and pausing every few minutes to listen and to gaze into the darkness ahead for some sign of the enemy.

In half an hour, Ward judged that they were within a few hundred yards of the camp. He stopped and put his hand on her arm. They stood there with straining ears, their nerves tense as there came to them the distant rumble of voices, evidently raised to a loud pitch by a quarrel.

"A little closer," Ward whispered, "but extremely careful."

He moved ahead, feeling his way carefully before planting his foot upon the ground, for he did not want the sound of a snapping twig to reveal them to the men at the camp.

Fifty feet ahead of him, as he made one pause, he noticed a shadow on the shore, darker and more distinctly marked than the shadows about it. He crept forward toward it cautiously and his heart leaped to his mouth as he finally discovered that it was the speed-boat that he had seen in the camp the night he had followed Nellie Blaydon in the moonlight.

He grasped the girl's wrist with convulsive fingers and pointed to it.

"It is their boat," he whispered. "We must get among the undergrowth inshore. They are very near now, so be especially careful."

She followed him as he crept more slowly than ever toward the low bushes that fringed the beach. Under one of them he found a hiding-place that made them secure from prying eyes from all directions.

"Lie down here," he instructed her. "I can see the glow of the fire. I have brought binoculars with me."

He made her comfortable beside him and then, stretching himself out flat, slowly and carefully parted the branches of the bush in front of them and peered through. In a moment he allowed the branches to come together again.

"I can see plainly," he said. "There are men around the fire and the tents are up. Take the glasses and see if you can recognize the men."

He parted the branches again and she fixed the binoculars upon the camp, focussing them until her vision was perfectly distinct. A sudden gasp from the girl proved that the sight was surprising to her.

"I know them all," she whispered. "There is Daniel Carter, the man my father employed to take care of *Caprice*, and there is Savage, the cook and deck-hand. Uncle Stephen told me they were in New York."

The bitterness of her tone was not lost upon Ward.

"And who are the others?" he asked.

"Carter's brother Matt, and Tom, the men who were in the camp the night you followed me down in the moonlight."

He could hear the men's voices raised in argument, though they were too far away to allow words to be distinguished.

"They are quarreling about something," she whispered. "Oh!"

She paused and handed him the glasses quickly.

"Look!" she said. "I think they are coming down here!"

He adjusted the glasses as rapidly as possible.

"Three of them have disappeared from the light of the fire," he said. "You take the glasses and see who are left."

"Captain Carter and Matt are still there," she said. "Matt is evidently trying to persuade Carter to do something he does not want to do, for I can see him gesticulating wildly while Carter is shaking his head obstinately."

Fenton suddenly put his hand on her arm with an admonitory "Hsh-h!"

With straining ears they listened and heard the sound of voices undoubtedly coming toward them, and the snapping of twigs and the rustling of underbrush warned them that the men were close.

They crouched low and held their breaths as the voices and footsteps passed seemingly almost within reaching distance and continued on down to the shore. Here one of the men struck a match and puffed vigorously at his pipe, the flare throwing all three into relief and showing that they had gone to the boat and seated themselves for a comfortable consultation.

It was difficult at first to make out what they were saying. Two of the men talked in ordinary conversational tones, but the third had a rumbling bass voice that carried fairly clearly to them.

"That is Savage," the girl whispered when he first spoke.

One of the other man seemed to be doing most of the talking. They could hear his voice rising and falling in inflections that were persuasive, as if he were arguing gently but persistently with his companions. But Savage's voice broke in upon him and the two lying breathless under the near-by bushes could distinguish his words plainly.

"Yes, Carter," he said. "And not only that. The thing's got t' be done; that's all. We agreed to it and we've gone too fur t' back out. Besides, th' money's too easy and too big t' let slip jest because your brother's chicken-hearted. We've gone into this thing with our eyes open and th' money's as good as in our hands and more as we want it for ever and ever, amen. And now that we've got it cinched so, I'll be —— if I'm going t' let him keep me from getting what's as good as mine now. No, sir; I ain't."

The younger Carter answered him, raising his voice so that they could hear a part of what he said. He was defending his brother; making a strong plea for him and he ended by saying, "If Dan don't want to go into this thing, let him get out and go his own way." But Savage interrupted him with a curse.

"It's too late for that," he declared. "Dan knows too much now. As long as he lived, th' rest of us wouldn't be safe. No sir; Dan goes into this thing and does his part or I'll be one t' give him what'll keep us safe from him in th' future. And you can go on up to th' camp and tell him so."

Here Tom again took up his persuasive line of attack, but his voice grew stronger and shriller as he saw Carter's obstinacy, and it was not long before they could hear him, too. He was following out Savage's first thought of the permanent financial value to all of them of the success of their plan.

"Why, man," he said, "think of what we'll each get in a lump! That's enough all by itself. But suppose you do spend yours. All you've got to do is go to the boss and say, 'Here; come across. I need some more, and how's he going to refuse you? Don't you see? He wouldn't dare refuse you—not as long as he lives. We'll all be independent for life the minute this thing's put across. Make your brother see it that way and tell him not to get sentimental about it and spoil his chance, and all our chances."

"Not mine, he won't spoil," Savage growled belligerently. "I'm telling you straight, Carter. Your brother goes into this here thing along with the rest of us or he's going t' get just what th' old man gets—and I'll give it to him myself. You tell him that. And Matt's with me and I guess we can depend on Tom. Eh, Tom?"

"Well, yes," Tom agreed. "I'd hate to see it come to that, but if it does, I'm with the crowd. It's too good a chance to lose because one man's soft-hearted, and I ain't going to lose mine on no such account."

Fenton felt the girl's hand reach out and grip his arm hard, her fingers closing convulsively over his flesh. She drew him to her and, with her lips close to his ear, whispered tremblingly—

"Did you hear what they said?"

"Yes. Sh—h!"

"I—I believe my father is not—is not dead yet."

"No. Wait."

She listened again in silence, but her hand did not release his arm. The grip was no longer convulsive; it was firm and steady and close, as though she sought the comforting certainty of his nearness to her in the darkness. They strained their ears again to hear the voices that came from the shore.

Savage was just ending a speech that they had not heard.

"Well," Carter agreed after a moment's silence, "I'll go up and see what I can do. But I don't believe Dan'll listen to reason. He's funny that way."

"And don't forget," Savage warned, "if he stays obstinate, something'll happen to him mighty quick."

The sound of scraping on the sand told

the listeners that the men had come from the boat and were once more threading the path between the shore and the fire. Again the footsteps passed so close that the two lying there under the sheltering branches of the underbrush held their breaths in tense anxiety and the fingers of the girl clutched Ward's arm in a firmer grip.

As the men passed, Ward once more focused the glasses upon the fire and lay watching the scene with a sense of impending climax. He saw that Captain Carter was seated alone, moodily gazing into the flames while Matt was pacing excitedly up and down on the other side of the fire, stopping every now and then to say a few words, while his great arms flailed the air. And, each time, Carter removed the pipe from his mouth, looked up, shook his head determinedly and resumed his brooding contemplation of the flames.

Matt swung about at the approach of the other three. Carter merely glanced up with a narrowing of the eyelids and then apparently turned his attention once more to the fire, but Ward could see that he kept casting covert glances from the corners of his eyes toward the group. Matt joined them and they stood for some time talking in tones so low that even Carter could not have been able to hear them.

As Ward watched, there was something in the brooding man's expression that focused his attention to the exclusion of the other four. Carter's narrowed eyes became still narrower and he seemed to be gathering his feet under him in a more firm position, like a cat poising for a spring.

He relaxed for a moment and resumed his apparently stoical attitude of moody contemplation and Ward, shiting the glasses, saw that the younger Carter had left the group and was approaching his brother.

He sat down beside Daniel and began to talk earnestly while the three men whom he had left stood silhouetted against the fire's glow, deep in a conversation of their own and not seeming to be interested in the brothers.

Again the elder Carter showed his obstinacy. As the younger one talked and gesticulated, he shook his head silently until, at last, he heaved his big shoulders, took the pipe from his lips and began to answer. As he talked, his brother's eyes fell. The older man noticed this and talked more earnestly and, with every word, the younger looked more and more crestfallen.

At length the elder paused and the other cast a quick, furtive glance at the men he had left. Then, with a rapid nod to his brother, he rose and rejoined them.

As he did so, Ward saw Captain Carter gather his feet once again in his crouching position. Slowly and carefully, his eyes still apparently fixed upon the fire and his lips still puffing contemplatively at his pipe, he began to edge over toward one of the tents. His hand at the same time sought one of his pockets and was withdrawn, holding a large clasp-knife which he quickly opened and replaced.

Ward saw him suddenly turn his head and say something over his shoulder as though he were flinging a warning to some one inside the tent. Twice he repeated this and then, with a quick spring, disappeared into the half-open flap.

The unexpected move acted like a bomb thrown among the other men. They sprang toward the fire, but Matt, calling a loud order to Savage, swerved and ran for the other tent, followed by the cook of *Caprice*. The younger Carter, with a snarled curse, sprang in between them as if to block their paths, but Tom, seeing the move, leaped at him, swung him about and, with a full circle of a giant fist, caught him fairly between the eyes. He fell like a log.

With the climax upon them, Ward rose and handed the glasses to the girl, drawing his revolver from his pocket as he did so.

"Watch closely—and stay here," he warned in a whisper. "I am going a little closer."

He saw her raise the binoculars to her eyes as he left her. With the noise of the turmoil in the camp, it was easy for him to hurry to the protecting trunk of a great tree on the very rim of the light, from which he could clearly see all that was going on. He had scarcely reached it before he saw Carter fling aside the tent-flap and spring out, followed by another man.

The newcomer stood for a moment before the tent, calmly surveying the scene in front of him. He was a man of commanding presence with the mark of the leader of men upon him. His fine broad brow was crowned by silver hair that gave him an appearance of age belied by his firm, well-preserved features and the erect and soldierly dignity of his carriage.

But, before this newcomer could take in the whole camp with his gaze, the other tent-flap was flung aside and the great bodies of Savage and Matt came hurtling out into the firelight. Ward gripped his revolver as he saw them. Each man carried a rifle.

"There's the —— old skinflint!" Savage shouted. "Get him, Matt. I'll take care of Carter."

Matt stopped short, raised his rifle to his shoulder and leveled it at the man still standing straight and dignified before the tent. With the movement, Ward heard a scream of anguish behind him. It was Nellie Blaydon and her voice was the voice of a woman terrified beyond control.

"Father!" she cried. "Father! Oh, Ward—save him."

Fenton's blood leaped with fire at her words. Scarcely waiting to take aim, he flashed his revolver out ahead of him, covered the bulky form of Matt and pulled the trigger.

The man crumpled and fell without so much as a cry of pain. His rifle flung from his nerveless fingers by the movement of his body, hurtled over almost to the tent from which he had leaped and he lay still. Savage wheeled at the sound of the shot and was about to bring his own rifle up to firing position, but Ward had already stepped out into the full glare of the flames, his revolver covering the cook.

"Drop it," he commanded sharply. "Drop it or I'll get you!"

CHAPTER XVII

THE SHOCK IN THE WOODS

FOR a moment the cook seemed to hesitate. Then, looking squarely into the unwavering muzzle of the revolver that pointed straight into his eyes, he released his grip on his rifle, let it fall to the ground, and then slowly raised his hands above his head.

From the corners of his eyes Ward could see the form of Tom moving stealthily over to the far tent, before which Matt's gun had fallen. He spoke without taking his eyes from Savage.

"Stay where you are, Tom!" he commanded. "Carter, you go over and get that rifle."

As Carter proceeded to obey, Ward heard a crash and rustle in the bushes behind him, and Nellie Blaydon dashed into the circle of firelight, rushing up to the old man, who still stood dignified and unperturbed before his tent, and throwing her arms hysterically about him.

"Oh, father—father!" she cried in an ecstacy of joy.

Ward saw the old man take the girl's head in his two hands, raise her face to his, and shower it with kisses. The aviator choked back the lump that rose in his throat and turned to the more grim work that confronted him.

Carter had picked up both rifles, slung them in the crook of his left arm, and was advancing toward him, his hand outstretched.

"I don't know who you are, sir," he said, "but I certainly am much obliged for your timely visit."

Ward shook his hand warmly and then once more turned to the men in front of him. He could see the form of Matt stirring on the ground. Carter's younger brother was rising, his hand to his bruised eyes.

"Get some rope and tie these three men up," he said to the captain. "Once we get them secure we can talk more comfortably."

"I'll just feel over their pockets first, sir," Carter answered, and he searched the men thoroughly while Ward kept them covered with his revolver. But no weapons were found upon them.

The hysterical sobbing of the girl ceased while Ward was waiting for Carter to find ropes. He could hear her and her father talking together in low tones, but he busied himself about the half-revived Matt, keeping a wary eye all the time upon the other two. The younger Carter came up to him.

"I'll take care of him, sir," he said respectfully. "I know something about nursing."

They bound their prisoners' arms behind their backs, and shackled their feet with ropes, and then, to make the job doubly secure, trussed them up to trees in the full light of the fire, so that any effort to loosen the bonds would be seen at once. This done, Captain Carter said:

"Will you come over to the tent and meet Mr. Blaydon, sir? He will want to thank you, I know."

Otto Blaydon stood at the tent flap as they came up. He was still straight and calm and dignified, and the girl beside him stood holding tightly to one hand while she alternately glanced up at him with eyes that glowed with love and pride, and glanced toward the two men approaching.

"Father," she said, "this is Mr. Fenton."

The old man disengaged his hand from hers and stretched it out to Ward. His grip was like a vise. His fingers seemed to be of nothing but big bone and powerful sinews, and he wrung Ward's hand in a way that made the aviator wince with pain.

"Mr. Fenton," said Blaydon, "my daughter has told me only a little of what you have done for her. What a man does for my daughter, he does for me, and if you have done more than she has had time to tell me—and she assures me you have—I confess, I see no way of ever repaying you as I think you deserve."

Ward flushed at the unexpected warmth of the words.

"Why," he stammered. "Why, no——"

"I know," Blaydon interrupted, with a grim smile. "You haven't done any more than any one else would have done, and you don't deserve any thanks and all that sort of thing. That is what you will probably say. But it will be no use, sir. Regardless of what you have done for Nellie, if you had been one second later on your trigger just now, I should be a dead man. That you can not deny."

Ward looked in confusion at the girl, but the expression he surprised in her eyes made the blood mount more riotously than ever to his cheeks. She was gazing up at him with a look only a trifle less admiring than the one with which she had been regarding her father. She flushed, and turned away quickly.

"You are very kind, Mr. Blaydon," said Ward, regaining control of himself with an effort. "I think we may postpone the thanks, however, until a less exacting time. We have some important work to do, and it must be done at once."

He turned again to Carter.

"Carter," he said, "you are familiar with the plans these fellows were making, weren't you?"

"Only partly, sir," said Carter. "I wasn't very popular, because I refused to join them."

"I saw that," Ward replied. "I was watching you through my binoculars. We must wring the truth out of one of them, then, because it will largely guide us in what we have to do tonight. Come with me, and see what we can do."

He led the way over to where the two men were trussed up to their trees, watching the scene with eyes that were dark and threatening, and showed clearly the lust for vengeance that was in both minds. The younger Carter had dragged the wounded Matt into the tent and was busy with him.

"Now, you men," said Ward, "we want to know just what your plans were, and where the others of your gang are. You can see for yourselves that you are in a bad way here. The only thing for you to do is to help us all you can, and, if you do, you will get off easily. If not, you will be handed over to the authorities, and what you will get will not be very pleasant. Come now; where is Stephen Blaydon?"

He addressed his question first to Savage, and then to Tom, but both men swore horribly at him, and refused to talk.

Carter tried coaxing and cajoling, and Ward followed his lead, assuring them of protection if they would give him the information he desired, but still they maintained their dogged silence.

Finally, Ward gave it up in disgust.

"Come," he said to Carter. "I know enough already to guide us fairly well. Get one of the rifles and come with me. Are you afraid to fly in an aeroplane?"

Carter swung upon him in astonishment.

"An aeroplane!" he exclaimed. "Do you mean to say that you and Miss Nellie came in an aeroplane?"

"Yes," said Ward. "Are you afraid to go with me in my machine?"

Carter hesitated.

"Well, I don't know," he said slowly. "I've got as much nerve as most men, but those flying machines never looked safe to me. Where do we have to go?"

Ward explained to him as rapidly as possible what he knew of the plans of Stephen Blaydon and Mrs. Herriot, and the probability of Greiner's being at Hackett's soon after the aeroplane arrived.

"All right," said Carter, "I'll go if Mr. Blaydon says so. But don't let me get a good swing at that man, Stephen Blaydon. I'll kill him if you do."

They rejoined the girl and her father at the tents, and Nellie and Ward told him all that they could in a few minutes of the things that they had discovered. The elder man listened gravely, nodding his head every now and then, and finally drew his watch from his pocket.

"That is enough," he said. "You can tell me the rest later. You have no more time than you will need to meet Greiner. You had better start."

"Yes, sir," Ward agreed. "But I feel suspicious that some of them may be on their way to this camp. I advise you and Miss Blaydon to take the boat and get far enough away from here to be out of their way when they arrive."

But the girl shook her head decidedly.

"Oh, I don't want you to go," she cried vehemently. "I don't want any more of this horrible risk. Why should you subject yourself——"

"You forget Phil Conway," he interrupted gently. "Phil may need help, too. We are not certain that Greiner will be able to handle it."

Mr. Blaydon nodded gravely.

"He is right, Nellie," he said. "I dislike the thought of the risks he is running, too, but with his friend in such danger there is nothing else he can do. Carter, you will go with him?"

"Yes, sir," said Carter. "I'd rather walk, but if he says the flying machine is better, why, I'll take a chance with it."

"Very well," Blaydon replied. "I will get your brother to help us pack the tents aboard the boat and we will tie our prisoners securely before we start."

"Then we must get to work at once," Ward said, and, turning to the girl, added, "You had better run down the Branch to the old camp site on the cove below. We can communicate with you there easily. If I find everything all right at Hackett's I will fly down tonight. If not, you will hear from one of us some time tomorrow."

They took Savage and Tom, one at a time, down to the boat, and bound them tightly to the thwarts, despite the profane protests of the prisoners. Then, carrying the wounded Matt gently, they made him as comfortable as possible on a bed of blankets on the bottom, and Ward and Carter were ready to start.

"Better get one of those rifles," Ward suggested. "We don't know what conditions will be when we get there."

Nellie came up to him as he stood waiting for the captain.

"I want to thank you," she murmured, "but I can't—I simply can't. There aren't any words——"

"Then don't try to find them," he interrupted with a smile. "I told you once that there was nothing in the world I so desired as to see you look happy again. I saw you look almost happy a moment ago."

"Yes," she said. "When I felt my father kiss me, then I was happy. I had given up the hope of ever seeing him alive again. That is why I can not find words to thank you. You have given me the most precious gift in the world. You will come down to the other camp tonight if you can?"

"Yes," he said. "As soon as I find Phil safe I will hurry to you."

She held out her hand to him with a sudden impulse.

"Good-by," she said, her voice choking. "And God bless you."

SHE turned swiftly and left him as Carter rejoined him, carrying one of the rifles.

"All ready, sir," he said.

Otto Blaydon came to them and wrung each by the hand.

"Good luck to you," he said earnestly. "And get Phil out of this if you can. He's a fine boy. He'd have to be, with the fine father he had."

They threaded their way in silence down the shore until they reached the machine resting quietly on the beach. Ward showed the captain how to get into her, and took his own seat beside the passenger, painfully conscious of the fact that Carter was nervous enough to need watching and reassuring until he became accustomed to the new sensation at least.

But a few minutes of steady circling put the novice fairly at his ease. He was evidently a man of ample self-control, and he exerted it to the utmost as the roaring of the motor and the shrieking of the wind deafened him.

Over their heads the clouds had been breaking, and now the stars were peeping out. There was, however, no moon, and the earth lay below them black and impenetrable, and so covered with shadow that they could not even guess at their altitude. Ward kept his pocket-flash constantly illuminating his aneroid barometer.

He did not head for Hackett's until he had once more reached a height at which his motor would be inaudible from the ground below. Finally, seeing the trembling needle creep around, he swung over northward and flew for the station.

Hardly settled on his course he saw far ahead, another of those long, thin fingers of white light that had proved a beacon for him on his trip down. He realized at once that it was the train bearing Greiner, coming down the long southward reach of the railroad from the Junction to the bend in the line below the hills.

He took his bearings and cut off his motor. Coasting down in a long, easy volplane, he strained his eyes over the side, and in a few minutes made out a tiny dot of light twinkling below. It was the light at Hackett's station. He circled and descended.

Five hundred yards to the north of it he saw a broad stretch of field, its boundaries clearly marked by the deeper shadows of the woodland that encompassed it. It was impossible in the darkness to tell whether or not it was smooth enough for a good landing, but it was the only available place in sight, so he muttered a prayer for luck, and headed for it.

They came to earth with a jolting and jarring that threatened to crumple the little wheels beneath the hull. They were never intended for such landings. He had attached them in his own factory after a design which was the result of his wide experimenting for a combination land-and-water machine, but he thanked his good fortune now that, when the work had been done, it had been done by his best workmen, and with the best material.

The machine careened drunkenly as its momentum carried it over the rough earth.

"Good Lord!" Carter exclaimed as it finally came to rest. "Do you always land that way?"

"Not since I left school in France," Ward answered. "Come on; let's see who is at the station to meet Greiner."

They crept carefully through the thick woodland, making long detours to avoid heavy patches of underbrush, and going so slowly that the train was already whistling in an agonizing shriek on its approach to the bend. It was a ramshackle bit of a place. There was only a long platform with a tiny wooden house in the center of it, and beside the house, the pole that held the lamp and the levers which operated the signal for the stopping of the trains. Inside the house the rattling of the telegraph instrument sounded loud and clear in the silence of the night.

While they watched, two men stepped out from the shadows of the underbrush across the railroad. One carried a lantern. They crossed to the platform, set down the lantern and waited.

It was too dark to see them clearly, but Ward was sure, as one of them lifted the lantern to turn its flame lower, that the man's face was so swarthy as to be notable. His heart beat faster, and he felt that he was at last nearing his goal.

With another shriek of the whistle and the grinding of brakes the train roared up to the station and stopped. One man descended, the conductor waved his lantern, and the train pulled out again.

As it started into motion Ward saw the swarthy man approach the newcomer and speak to him. They stood talking for some minutes and then the swarthy man called to his companion, who, taking up the lantern, joined them, and the three crossed the tracks and plunged into the underbrush on the other side.

"Well, I'll be ——!" Ward muttered. "Carl isn't with him. I wonder what has happened?"

"Only one way to find out and that's follow them," declared Carter, and he led the way carefully.

On the other side of the station they saw the lantern flitting among the trees at some distance. The men had not taken a path into thick growth as it had appeared from their first position. When they reached the spot they found that a rude dirt road led from the station in among the trees, and it was down this that the trio ahead were walking.

Suddenly Ward heard a rustling sound in the bushes alongside the road ahead of him.

He had just time to warn his companion, and draw him back, when the rustling grew louder, and against the light of the lantern ahead they made out the shadows of three men creeping from the undergrowth. As the last one came out Ward started at some familiar movement, and then recognized him. It was Carl Loder.

Ward whistled softly, a whistle that Carl knew well, and the mechanician stopped and wheeled about.

"You, Chief?" he whispered, and when

Ward came up and spoke to him he hurried forward to explain to the men with him.

"Mr. Greiner came down on the train ahead of the one we expected him on," he told Ward in low tones, as they walked along. "He sent us down here on the earlier one so we could take up our positions along this road. One of these men knew the country well and described it to him. These men are from the constable's office at the Junction. Mr. Greiner made the arrangement with them."

"What is his plan?" Ward asked.

"He didn't want us to come with him because he felt certain that these fellows have got their camp somewhere in the woods here. He said one or two of them would be certain to come to the station to meet him and lead him to the camp. Whatever they intend to do to him they would do there, he says, because they would have everything prepared to get away and cover their tracks. So he got us to scout around until we saw which way the men came from, and then hide so as to follow them and him. We ain't to interfere until he yells for us."

"I see," said Ward. "Does he think Stephen Blaydon is here?"

"Yes; and that fat party with the puffy breath. He says this dark man you've been wondering about is known in New York as 'Joe.' He's a Mexican Indian, and it seems he's done several shady jobs for the fat lady. They came from the same part of the West. He's a real bad man, Greiner says."

"What does he think they are doing with Mr. Conway?"

"He thinks Joe's got him and is going to knife him. He says it's evidently all a part of Blaydon's scheme, but Nigger Joe don't belong to the other crowd."

"I see; his specialty is to remove Mr. Conway and Mr. Greiner."

They followed the light cautiously along the road for nearly a mile. Then the men ahead turned off and plunged into the forest to the east, threading their way among the trees and through the underbrush, so that silent pursuit became more and more difficult.

At length one of the men gave a low whistle which was answered almost at once from out of the darkness ahead. Instantly a patch of light, oblong in shape, glowed from among the trees—an opened doorway in a shack of some kind.

Ward expected that now, at last, Greiner would give the signal for an attack, but he did not. Instead, he went calmly with his guides into the shack, the door was closed, and the forest once more became impenetrably dark.

"There must be a window somewhere," Ward whispered, as his companions gathered about for consultation. "It may be boarded up, but in a tumble-down shack of this kind there are sure to be chinks through which we can look."

"We'd better do it, too," said one of the men from the Junction. "Seems t' me Greiner's takin' an awful chance goin' in thataway."

"Come on then," Ward said, but as they began to creep forward they halted at the sound of sudden scuffling inside the shack, and the curses of a man's voice.

"Quick!" Ward commanded in a whisper.

They stole around to the back of the shack and here, through a chink in a boarded-up window they could see a thin streak of light. Ward tiptoed up to it and looked through.

In the glow of the two lanterns the sight that met his gaze made his muscles suddenly grow tense. Greiner was struggling to free himself from two of the men, while the third was circling about, trying to get an opening to deal the detective a blow on the head with the butt of a revolver. One man, swarthy and beetle-browed, had attacked Greiner from behind. His left arm was about his victim's throat, his right hand clamped over the mouth to prevent an outcry. Ward knew him at once for Joe.

The second man had ducked under Joe's attack, and had clasped Greiner's legs in his two huge arms. He was lifting the struggling form from the floor as Ward looked in.

"Come on, men," Ward whispered. "To the front quick. Break the door in. Carter, you stay at this window with your gun. If the door proves too strong, and they start to shoot, drop them from behind."

He led the way around to the front, throwing all caution to the wind in his haste to save Greiner. Turning ten feet from the door he rushed for it with all his force, leaped bodily into the air, and crashed against it, shoulder first, with his full weight.

With a loud splintering of wood, it gave and fell inward. Ward heard the frightened shouts of the men inside as he sprawled at full length upon it; there was a shot and then another, and he felt a red-hot twinge in his left shoulder.

Instantly all was confusion around him. His own men rushed in over his prostrate form while the three inside tried to rush out. Ward tried to rise, but was thrown back by the last of his companions who stumbled into him, recovered himself, and ran on.

Pandemonium reigned in the little shack. The smell of burned gunpowder made the air pungent; shots resounded from every side, and through it all curses and shouts and cries of pain made the night hideous.

Almost as suddenly as it had begun the turmoil ceased. Ward saw that a bullet had shattered one of the lanterns, and that a stream of flaming oil was pouring over the floor, but Carl noticed it at the same time, and smothered it with handfuls of earth from the dirt floor.

Then, with an odd sense of personal detachment, Ward realized that he was growing dizzy. He felt no pain, but a weakness that he could not understand swept over him, and he closed his eyes a moment to allow the vertigo to pass.

He heard the movements of men around him, the sound of talking, of giving orders, of the cursing of the conquered. Then some one touched him, and he heard Carl's anxious voice.

"What's the matter, Chief?" the mechanician asked.

"I hurt my shoulder when I knocked the door down," Ward said. "Have we got them all?"

"Tying them up now. Greiner's all right, and—what do you think? Mr. Conway's there, tied tight up in a bunk. They're loosening him now. He was gagged so he couldn't make a sound. We didn't know he was there until he started to kick. John Drummond's here, too."

"Thank God!" Ward exclaimed fervently. "I'll go——"

He tried to rise, but an excruciating pain shot through his right shoulder. Involuntarily he put his hand up to it but withdrew it quickly, looking at it with amazement in the dim glow of the lamplight. It was covered with blood.

"Ask Mr. Conway to come here," he said. "I'll lie quiet until my shoulder stops hurting."

As the mechanician walked away Ward again put his hand to his shoulder and felt his coat-sleeve soaked with blood. He realized then what had happened. He remembered that, just as the door crashed in under his weight he had seen a flash of fire from the window. It was Carter's gun. The captain's bullet had missed its mark and had shattered Ward's shoulder.

Phil Conway, stiff and sore, and rubbing himself ruefully, hurried over to him with hand outstretched. Ward half rose and grasped it warmly.

"Knew you'd stop in here sooner or later," beamed Phil. "You've been busy, of course, so you didn't have time before. I've missed you, really. Had no idea I should ever want to see you so badly. Hello; what's the matter?"

Ward, with a moan of pain, sank back upon the dirt floor, his hand again seeking his shoulder. Phil saw the motion and put his own fingers on the spot. He drew them away quickly, with a gasp, as he felt the blood.

"Oh, I say, you fellows," he called. "Come here quickly. Mr. Fenton's been shot. Come on! —— it all, hurry!"

But Ward did not hear the last of the sentence. The hut and the lamps and the men about him suddenly began whirling in mad circles all about, and then complete oblivion came to him as he lost consciousness.

CHAPTER XVIII

"I NEED YOU VERY MUCH"

ON A perfect September morning, with the warm sun caressing his back and the cool breeze fanning his cheek, Ward Fenton, swathed in blankets, sat in his invalid's chair on the lawn of the Blaydon country place on the Severn River, below Baltimore. The red clay cliffs at the lawn's edge fell steep and picturesque to the lapping waves of Round Bay, where it opened up from the river for its splendid sweep of the high shores.

Far across the waters he could see the wooded mound of St. Helena's Island, its fine trees flaming red and gold with the coming of Autumn, and, to the northwest, where the bay narrowed and became the river again the dazzling white gleam of sand banks shimmered through the haze.

Everywhere was color. The trees rioted in their changing garbs of splendor, the water was never so blue, here and there among the lush greens of the banks, the red clay or the white sand jutted out in bold promontories that rose precipitously from the very edge of the shore, and overhead the deep blue of the sky was flecked with fleecy white clouds that drifted down the river to disappear over the horizon beyond Annapolis and Kent Island in the Chesapeake.

Ward drew in a deep breath, thrilling with the desire for life, for action, for an outlet to his long-pent-up vitality. But even the effort of this breath made a sharp pain shoot through his shoulder under its plaster cast and bandages, and he realized that he would be chair-ridden for many days to come.

He glanced hungrily toward the house, nestling back among the trees. It was a hunger not of the body but of the spirit. Nellie Blaydon had left him almost half an hour ago. He wanted her back already.

It was good to feel his strength returning to his body, and the keenness to his mind, but the joy of fresh living was tinctured with a sorrow that almost made him wish to extend his invalidism indefinitely. Perfect health would take this heaven from him. It would drive him away from the girl who had come to mean more to him than life or the desire to live.

He went back in memory over the events that had brought about such a change in his destiny. Up to the time when Carter's bullet had found the bone in his shoulder and shattered it, all was perfectly clear, but from the moment he lost consciousness, with Phil Conway shouting to the men to come and help, the events were dim, and of some of them he knew only from what he had been told.

They had stopped the flow of blood as best they could after securing their prisoner in the shack, and had then carried the unconscious form over the long rough trail, to where he had left his aeroplane in the field beyond Hackett's station.

Here, Phil, in desperation, called to his aid the skill that he had acquired in the flying school in France, but which he had largely lost through lack of use. The chances were even that he would wreck the machine, but, with no other train until the morning, and with Ward's life-blood pouring out of the wound despite the tight tourniquet, there was no alternative.

The machine had smashed badly in landing in a field near the Junction. Phil had been bruised, and Ward, a helpless, unconscious form, had been tossed out, and his wound further opened, but Conway had staggered with his burden to a house nearby, had secured a wagon to drive to the nearest doctor, and there first aid was given, which saved Ward's fast-ebbing life.

Carl carried the news down the shore to the camp where Nellie Blaydon and her father were waiting. And the old man, grimly realizing from his daughter's glowing words, what a vast debt he owed the injured aviator, had hurried to the Junction to take personal charge of affairs, and to see to it that only the most skilled medical aid available should be trusted with the patient.

He had engaged a private car to carry Ward to Baltimore as soon as the condition of the wound permitted removal, and there an automobile had conveyed him to Johns Hopkins. Blaydon almost lived at the hospital during the slow recovery that followed the operation. He sat by Ward's bed as gently as a woman, his keen eyes fixed upon the sick man with an expression of affection that was almost fatherly in its tenderness.

The doctors had permitted but little conversation. Ward's life was at a very low ebb, but his natural strength and the recuperative powers gained by his outdoor life stood him in good stead, and he conquered. And then, one day, he summoned up his courage sufficiently to ask Blaydon if he could not see Miss Nellie. The old man flushed, repressed a grim smile, and, in a tone of gentle bluster, said,

"You just forget about Nellie for a while. She's been pestering the life out of me to let her come here and take care of you, but I've sent her off down to my Summer place on the Severn. She'd make a nice mess of things here."

"Why?" asked Ward.

"Why? Why, because she's so broken up about this thing that she isn't fit to take care of a sick cat. When Carl told her you were so badly hurt he was afraid you'd die, do you know what she did? She fainted. Yes, sir; Nellie Blaydon fainted. First time I ever knew her to do such a thing in her life. And she's been a nervous wreck ever since until I took her the word the other day that you were out of danger."

Ward tried hard not to let the old man see the flush that mounted to his cheeks.

"Yes; I guess I'm out of danger now," he said. "I'll be able to go back to work in a few days."

"You'll do no such thing. No, sir! You're going to be taken right down to my place and breathe in some of that wonderful air down there off the salt water of the Severn and the pines of Round Bay. Nellie can nurse you there. But you're not to think of work until that arm is as good as new."

"But," Ward protested, "my new factory must be rushed to completion, and a force of men engaged. I have orders for aeroplanes for shipment to Europe that will keep us rushed for the next year."

"That's all right. Phil Conway is taking charge of that. You just keep quiet, and we'll take care of everything. Meanwhile, Nellie's wating for you, so you want to hurry and get well enough to move."

And on the day set for his release from the hospital Nellie herself came for him in her automobile, and drove him through the miles of perfect country to their home on the water's edge. Her father had left the day before, she explained to him. He had received word from Greiner that the detective had at last located Stephen Blaydon and Mrs. Herriot.

AND then Ward entered upon his heaven. Nellie Blaydon was with him almost every minute of the day, wheeling him out from the house to the very brow of the clay bank over the river, sitting beside him, reading and talking, and refusing to let him discuss the tribulations of their other days together until her father returned.

She helped him eat his meals, playfully insisting on feeding him herself much of the time, and laughing at his dogged efforts to handle knife and fork with one hand. She hovered over him, anticipating his every want, seeing to his comfort with a gentleness that wrung his heart when he thought of the coming end of it all, and regarding him with great brown eyes into which there crept at times a something that set his blood afire.

She came running down to him now as he sat there remembering all these things.

"Good news!" she cried. "Father is on his way home. He just telephoned from Baltimore. He'll be here in an hour."

Ward looked at the beautiful face, glowing with health and happiness, and wondered what his life would be without it in the future.

"Fine!" he cried, mocking her mood, and then added in pretended petulance. "And after he gets here you will give him all of your attention, and I'll have to have one of the servants take care of me."

"It will do you good," she said, with a mischievous twinkle. "You have had altogether too much of my attention already. I have spoiled you."

"Spoil me some more," he begged. "Sit here and just let me look at you. You needn't bother to talk."

She flushed at the admiration in his tone and eyes.

"I must go to the house and tell them father will be home for lunch," she said. "Much as I should like to pose simply as a bit of scenery, I shall have to attend to my duties."

When she had left him Ward leaned back in his pillows, closed his eyes, and, with the soft breeze playing over his face, dozed contentedly into a sound sleep. He was awakened by the buzzing of a motor, and the Blaydon car swung in from the boulevard and stopped in front of the house. Otto Blaydon stepped down and waved to him, but the man's eyes were grave.

He disappeared into the house, but came out again in a few minutes, and took a chair beside Ward.

"Well, Nellie tells me you are getting along famously," he said.

"I feel much better. I shall be well soon."

"Good!" Blaydon crossed his legs and uncrossed them again and fumbled nervously with a cigar.

"Greiner got Stephen and that woman," he said at length. "They were getting ready to take a one-horse steamer out of New Orleans and beat it away from the country."

"You saw them then?"

"Yes. He didn't have them arrested. He simply told them that he would if they made any fuss, got them to a hotel and kept watch over them while he sent for me. He told them I wouldn't prosecute if they would do as I wanted them to do."

"How did they ever get away from Hackett's?" Ward asked curiously.

"They were waiting in Phil's car half a mile or so down that road when they heard the shooting. That told them that their plans had gone wrong, so they made their way by a log road down to the camp, where you stepped in just in time to save me. There was no one there, of course, so they knew their whole gang had been rounded up and that they were due to disappear as quickly and quietly as possible."

He fidgetted nervously again, and then finally seemed to make up his mind.

"Ward," he said gently, "you've made Nellie and me think a lot of you by the way you've acted through this whole thing. Not only by what you've done for us, you know, but you've gone through it all without asking questions."

"I promised Miss Nellie I wouldn't," Ward explained with a smile.

"Humph! I don't know another man in the world who could have kept such a promise—even to Nellie. And she generally gets everything she wants. You must have been sorely tempted several times to demand explanations, for some of the things you found out."

"I'll confess I was."

"Well, as things were, no one could have explained the whole thing to you. Nellie didn't know much about it. She was only doing what I had instructed her to do, and even I got to the stage where I didn't know where I stood. It all came out of a perfectly harmless joke. At least, no harm was meant at the time."

"A joke!" Ward exclaimed. "It seems to me that it became mighty serious for a joke."

"Well, it was Stephen's idea of fun. He's always been scatter-brained and irresponsible. That's why I took advantage of our father's instructions, and simply kept him on a moderate allowance instead of giving him his share of the estate. I had the right to do that under father's will.

"This joke came out of the one time I tried to use Stephen in a really big business deal. I didn't want him to take a part in the deal; he was simply to act as an entertainment committee.

"As you know, I have some rather large interests in South America. A year or more ago I stumbled on a chance to double my holdings down there by combination with a big syndicate that was forming, and I ran down and made the preliminary arrangements with the understanding that, after other matters had been completed, the men in the syndicate would come to New York and complete the deal.

"They sent a man up here to say that everything was all right, and that they would soon be on their way. This man told me quietly that they were taking this trip more or less as a picnic, and that they proposed to see all of the famous gaiety of New York while they were here. He suggested that it would be good business if I would arrange things so that they could paint the town red without having to waste time asking their way about."

Old Blaydon smiled grimly.

"The humor of that," he said, "lies in the fact that I have never touched a drop of liquor in my life, and that I abhor the alleged 'gaiety' of Broadway as I abhor nothing else in this world. So much so that I doubt if I know the name and location of more than two white-light resorts in the whole city.

"But, of course, I did not tell this to my friend from South America. I merely told him that I would see that they had all of the White Way they wanted, and then I sent for Stephen and told him to go ahead with any program that he thought would best suit under the circumstances, and have everything charged to me regardless of the cost. That is where Mrs. Herriot stepped in."

Blaydon's lips curled in a look of inexpressible loathing, and Ward could see his fists clench on the arms of his wicker chair.

"Stephen's program," he explained, "included many parties at her apartments, where she surrounded herself with the gayest life of the city. I went to New York to see one of the South Americans about a tangle in the deal, and, on my arrival, found that he had gone, with the others, to one of Mrs. Herriot's parties. It was most important that I see him, and I could not wait until the following day, so I jumped into a taxi, drove to the Herriot apartment, and asked for Stephen.

"The noise told me plainly that the party was in full swing, and that everybody had had too much to drink.

When Stephen came out and saw me, he looked frightened to death, and he soon told me why. One of the visitors had tried to make love to Mrs. Herriot more ardently than Stephen fancied, and he, to prevent it, declared that she and I were engaged to be married. The South Americans had taken it seriously, and had toasted the supposedly approaching nuptials at every one of their parties.

"And there I had suddenly stumbled upon them all when most important business was supposed to be keeping me away from the side of my fair fiancée!

"If you know anything of the Latin temperament, you will know that to hoax him in such a way as that, is to insult him beyond the bounds of forgiveness. I realized this, and so did Stephen. He advised me to carry out the joke just for that evening, and I reluctantly agreed to do so, rather than have it interfere at that crucial time with a favorable turn that our negotiations were taking. So we sent for the sprightly Mrs. Herriot, talked it all over, and I went into the party playing the most unpleasant rôle of a lover suddenly arrived."

Blaydon's expression was so indicative of nausea that Ward laughed in spite of the gravity of the story.

"I can imagine your feelings," he said. "You see, I know Mrs. Herriot."

"Yes," Otto Blaydon continued. "It was Mrs. Herriot who saw her chance in my public admission of our engagement. They have now admitted to me that they planned the first part of their scheme as soon as the party broke up that night. Mrs. Herriot was to threaten to sue for breach of promise. Stephen was to save me—for a substantial consideration. They both knew my abhorence of scandal. We have never had one in the Blaydon family, and I had hoped that we never would.

"So Mrs. Herriot called on me at my New York office and calmly and unblushingly informed me that she intended to marry me or make me pay dearly for her supposedly wounded feelings. I made some inquiries about her, and found that she was a woman quite capable of carrying out her threats. For the first time in my life I became panic-stricken. I sent for Stephen and told him that, as he had got me into the scrape, he must get me out of it, or he would never get another cent from me.

"The upshot of it was that he proposed the scheme that we carried through. I had intended to break up *Caprice*, because she was old and unseaworthy, and it would not have been honest to sell her. So Stephen outlined the plan whereby I was to pretend to start for South America in her, and we were to scuttle her off the coast. I was then to make my way down to Key West and take steamer from there to South America, leaving Carter and Savage to help Stephen if he wanted them. Stephen was then to tell Mrs. Herriot that I had lost my life, and persuade her to marry some one else, or sign a legal release. For this, I agreed to pay him $50,000, provided he succeeded.

"We carried through most of the scheme until Mrs. Herriot quite unexpectedly insisted on visiting the wrecked *Caprice*, and there, with her suspicions aroused that Stephen was not playing fair with her, she wormed a complete confession from him, and evolved her own plot to marry Stephen, with whom she has been in love for a long time, and at the same time put him in possession of the part of the estate he was to get at my death."

"I see," said Ward. "That was when Miss Nellie and I overheard them talking on the beach."

"Yes; Nellie told me about that. Poor Nellie! She was almost as much in the dark as you were. I did not tell her all of the details of my predicament. I merely gave her to understand that I had got myself entangled with this woman, and that I was going to pretend to be drowned with *Caprice*, so as to avoid a scandal, but that the drowning would be kept quiet.

"But Mrs. Herriot became too ambitious. As soon as Stephen told her the whole scheme, she saw her opportunity, and persuaded Stephen to take advantage of this manufactured evidence of my death, and to have me killed actually. So they got this gang together down the shore, and Stephen sent word to me when I put in to Havana that his scheme was succeeding, but that there was one tangle that I must come back and settle in person. He told me of your discovery of the wreck of the yacht, and said that that was the cause of the tangle.

"I was so glad to think that I was getting out of the scrape that I fell into his trap at once. He managed to buy Savage over to help murder me, and Carter pretended that he, too, was bought, because he could not reach me in time to warn me, and thought he might get an opportunity to save me if he was considered one of the gang. Meantime, Mrs. Herriot sent to New York for this Joe, who was one of the bad men in her younger days in the West. Joe's part was to get rid of you and Conway and Greiner.

"They got me up to that camp on the pretext that you were demanding money to keep quiet, and that I would have to come up and buy you off, or you would reveal the whole thing. When I demanded that they produce you, they bound me hand and foot, and I should have been murdered there in the tent if Carter hadn't come in and cut my bonds just as you arrived."

"Who would believe it possible," Ward shuddered, "that a woman could be such a fiend?"

"I believe that Mrs. Herriot is capable of anything," declared Blayden. "Unfortunately now, she is my sister-in-law. She and Stephen were married as soon as Greiner discovered them."

"And what are you going to do with them?" Ward asked.

"I have agreed not to prosecute, provided Stephen will take a position with my company in South America and take his wife with him. They have submitted to the inevitable. We will not see them again."

"And the others of the gang—are you going to let them go, too?"

"Yes; it would not be fair to punish them and allow the instigators of their crimes to go free. They have all agreed to leave this part of the country."

"And so," mused Ward, "that ends it all."

Otto Blaydon glanced at him sharply.

"I guess that depends on you, doesn't it?" he demanded.

Fenton flushed scarlet at the tone, and the look.

"I—I don't understand," he stammered.

The older man placed an affectionate hand upon his arm.

"Ward," he said gently. "You're very fond of Nellie, aren't you?"

"I love her more than I thought I should ever love any woman."

"But, Conway tells me that you think I would object to you because you do not happen to have earned quite as large a fortune as the Blaydons have."

Ward did not answer.

"If you think that," Blaydon pursued, "remember that I did not earn that fortune either. My father made it. And what the Blaydons need now in the family is not more money but more manhood."

Fenton could find no words to reply.

"And when it comes to real manhood," Otto Blaydon continued, his eyes glowing, "I am willing to tell you that you are an example that I should thank God to welcome into my family."

"But—but," Ward objected, "Miss Nellie may not feel the same way about it."

Otto Blaydon sprang to his feet with a laugh.

"That I refuse to find out for you," he said. "You will have to ask her yourself."

* * *

THE brilliant half-disk of a first-quarter moon hung low in the sky over Sunken Island Creek as Ward Fenton, now almost recovered, and Nellie Blaydon walked down the steps from the lawn to the boat-landing on the edge of Round Bay. Under the rustic top of the Summer-house, on the end of the little wharf to which the Blaydons moored their pleasure craft, they took seats on a bench, and gazed for a long time in silence down the path of moonlight that shimmered across the waves.

"Do you remember the last moon?" the girl asked at length.

Ward laughed easily.

"I'll forget it if you want me to," he promised. "You see, I haven't asked any questions yet."

"You have been wonderful—wonderful," she said, her voice full of boundless admiration. "You have not even asked me about the telephone."

"Oh, I suppose you thought I was one of the crooks," he laughed.

"I thought you were from Mrs. Herriot," she nodded. "I thought she had sent you to find out something about father. Uncle Stephen was in New York at the time, making the arrangements that father has told you about, but I was afraid that if she knew he was there she would find out what he was doing. So, on the spur of the moment, I conceived the telephone trick, and told you it was my message to Chicago that caught him."

"And that moonlight night?" he asked.

"It was the night I received the message, saying she was coming at once to Sea View. Uncle Stephen was at the camp down the shore—I knew he would want to know at once, so I hired a fast launch and went down to him. I knew very little about father's supposed engagement at that time, you know, and practically nothing of the plan that he and Uncle Stephen formed, except that Mrs. Herriot was to be convinced that father had been drowned.

"Father told me to follow Uncle Stephen's instructions in everything. I did so without protest, though I loathed the part he compelled me to play. But when he told me he was going to have your machine destroyed, I revolted. That was the time we quarreled—when he went away in the little tender to arrange it with the men down the shore."

"And you did not suspect him?"

"Not until you warned me. Then, when that telegraph operator brought the message down to Uncle Stephen, I began to see that you might be right. For Uncle Stephen told me that the telegram was genuine, that Carter and Savage had really landed from the wreck. He said that, when they tried to sink *Caprice*, something went wrong, and father was drowned when she went down. I did not know whether to believe him or not. But, when we discovered Mrs. Herriot in the cabin after he left the yacht, listening to what we were saying, I began to see that they were deceiving me, and what we overheard them saying that day behind the knoll showed all too clearly that your suspicions were right."

"Except my suspicions of you," he reminded her.

"Oh, those are the things that you must forget!" she cried.

"Very well," he agreed, "I'll forget them and remember only the pleasant parts."

The girl shuddered.

"Pleasant parts!" she exclaimed. "How could you find anything pleasant in such an awful experience?"

"I found you," Ward reminded her gently. "I also found one other thing."

He paused, and came closer.

"Do you know what that was that I found?" he asked. "It was—that I could love." But my heart cried out to me: 'What are you that you should dare look at her?' And I had no answer.

"Once, you said to me, 'I need you very, very much.' And I promised to stay with you as long as you needed me. But the need is gone now. I have kept my promise. I can go."

Suddenly she looked up at him, and put out her hand.

"No—no!" she cried. "You can not go! You said you would stay as long as I needed you, and oh, Ward, I do—I do. I need you very, very much!"

THE PILLAR OF FLAME

by EDWARD PILSWORTH

RED TEMPLE stood on the top of a hill, and watched the oil gang. Like many other men from the North, he had gone to the Ozarks full of ambition, only to find that his training as a Chicago mechanic was a bad education for a Southern farmer.

The land was there, other folks were raising crops, but, well, the girl, with a sick father and a whining, ailing mother on her hands, might get tired of waiting. He was pondering now, whether or not to let the farm go in on the mortgage and strike the foreman below for a job.

"Three dollars a day looks like real money," he muttered.

All along the lowland, between the double range of hills, oil-derricks stuck up to the sky, and right below him they were drilling another well.

As he looked, something happened. Men turned and ran away from the new hole, shouts and cries floated by, a fierce hissing filled the valley, a sort of indefinite pall seemed to settle in the low air, and then came a whiff of pungent gas.

"Gee!" he muttered, then stopped and bent over, watching the men below.

One of them was headed directly for the place where Red stood, climbing strenuously for the high land, and he could see the chest of the man straining, and presently hear the whistling of his breath.

"Some well!" gasped the newcomer, as he reached the high land. "Some son-of-a-gun of a hole, believe me!"

"What's the trouble?"

"Gone off too quick! That's th' trouble. Nobody looking for nothing yet, when, puff! up comes gas by the million. I tell you, if the oil runs as good as th' gas, she'll be some quirter."

For a while the two sat; then, without taking his eyes from the valley, the man began again:

"We went through a shale-bed a couple of days ago, but didn't strike nothing, and kept on drilling. Then, just now, we pulled the tool, and holy mackerel, off she went! Must be a gas-pocket in that shale, and now it's gushing through that eight-inch pipe like a locomotive." Again he stopped, then reached round to his hip pocket, pulled out a plug of tobacco, and bit off a chew. "Th' oil's likely to squirt 'most any time, and then something surely will be doin'."

"I suppose they'll cap it, won't they?"

"Would if they could, but there ain't a cap in th' valley."

For a long time the two sat, while the sun circled on, and Red pondered more than ever that three dollars a day, when all at once——

"There she goes!" cried the other, and Temple looked up to see a great column spouting in the air.

A dirty grayish mass it shot up, slowly rising, twenty-five, fifty, sixty, seventy-five, maybe a hundred feet it reached at last. Like a fountain of water, it held together till near the top, then spread out in feathery fronds, to turn, finally, and fall in a kind of dirty spray.

The day was deadly still, not the smallest ripple of air, and the sound of the oil, as it rose, turned and splashed back to earth, came up to them quite plainly. The smell of gas also grew stronger, the sickening, pungent odor of natural gas, slowly taking the place of the air.

"Some gusher!" said the man, more as if talking to himself. "Some squirt, believe me! As sure as my name's Tom Knuckles, she's shooting thirty thousand barrels." Then a little wait. "I bet she turns out the best well in the valley at that. Some gusher!"

"You-all sure has it!" said a voice from behind, and Red turned to see a neighboring farmer standing by. "Howdy, Red," the newcomer added.

"Howdy, Dave." Then to the other, "Quite a waste of oil there."

"Oh, not so much," answered Knuckles. "We'll have to make a reservoir, I guess, while they send an' get a cap." Then rising to his feet. "Well, I gotta beat it back." And he started down the hill, followed by the other two.

WITH every step downward, the cries of those below came plainer. Somebody, with the least trace of Irish in his talk, was shouting orders, and, at the sound of this voice, Knuckles set up a faster pace. With each step, also, the smell of gas grew stronger, till, by the time they reached the level, it was almost overpowering.

Red's head was swimming and aching as he strode along, and he could hardly breathe, while his nostrils tingled with a sort of dry smart. And, as they came closer, the rush of the oil grew louder, and the splash of it falling upon the ground was almost like a waterfall. Presently it began to spray upon them, and Red and Dave stopped, while the oil man went forward.

"Hi there! You two!" shouted a voice presently, and, turning, Red saw the Irish foreman. "Want a job? Four dollars a day in it."

Dave shook his head and turned away, but Red considered a moment, then nodded.

"All right!" cried the foreman, as he came forward. "Grab one of those shovels there and beat it down the incline. Throw up a levee, and head off the oil. Get a move on now! Beat it!"

Red snatched a pick and shovel and started down the valley to the place pointed out, and, at a glance, saw what was to be done. The volume of oil, shooting out of an eight-inch pipe with all the force of an outraged nature, had deluged the land around, and was now running in little trickles off the sides of the valley to the low ground.

In the center a regular stream was forming, and this he had to head off by a dirt bank. When done, the oil would be confined in a great pool, and could be pumped out at any time.

Studying the lay of the land, he found a place, a little farther along, where a couple of insularities ran out into the valley, leaving a matter of but thirty or forty feet between, and here he set to work with pick and shovel.

The sod was tough, but he cut it through, and soon had a little bank a couple of inches high or so that held back the oil-flow and spread from one of the little capes to the other. Working with all his might he was just able to keep ahead of the oil, and soon a pool formed back of his dam, which gradually spread over the land.

Then he began to pick up the ground, adding a few inches here, a foot there, and strengthening it in one place, raising it in another, thickening it somewhere else, as the need arose.

Once or twice the foreman came and watched him, grunted a little, but said nothing, and by the time it grew dark a rambling levee, eighteen inches or so in height, stretched across the valley. Back of it lay a pool of oil, steadily growing in size, dirty, slick and treacherous-looking, and running into every little hollow or cranny of the hills and bottom.

Three hundred feet or so away the well spouted, throwing its volume into the air with a rush and sound like some great waterfall. All the neighboring land was greasy with oil, everything was saturated where it had splashed and the great drops had fallen. And with the sound was mingled the rush of gas, millions of feet spreading over the valley and thickening the air so that it was almost impossible to breathe.

Not a trace of wind disturbed it, for even on the hilltops the air was dead and burned with the heat; no life, no motion, no anything, while down in this valley, shut off by the neighboring highlands, it was even worse. And the carbureted hydrogen of the natural gas filled every nook and cranny of the hills and hugged the ground closely.

"Got a little brains, you have, bedad!" said a voice behind him, and he turned to find the foreman looking at the dam. "Some different to most of the roughnecks round here. You ain't no farmer, that's a cinch."

"Machinist," replied Red.

"Umph! Well, I got a job for you at the same wages for a month or two anyway. Want it?"

Red made a quick calculation. He could hire some one to tend his farm for a dollar a day or so.

"I'll go you for a week, anyway," he answered.

"All right! Show up tomorrow. This pool ain't going to be a pair of treys in a jack-pot. We got to have another down there somewhere," and he pointed vaguely down the valley.

"What's she spouting?" Knuckles said. "Twenty or thirty thousand barrels?"

"Thirty nothing! Fifty's more it," and, turning, the man walked away, while Red wandered home.

The girl was much in his thoughts that night, the girl that was waiting for him in Chicago, who might need something more than a five-dollar-a-week job in a department store, if her father died, and he pondered long on what action to take. The farm he was sure would do little for him, while the oil gang—but he hated to admit that he was beaten, and pushed the temptation away and turned into bed.

WHEN he reached the dip in the hill next morning a man stopped him.

"Douse that pipe!" he was ordered. "Th' valley's full of gas."

It was indeed. Down at the bottom, there seemed no air at all. He breathed gas, and seemingly nothing but gas, and found the prohibition of the pipe was very rational. The foreman set him in charge of a gang of diggers that he had raked up from somewhere, roughly indicated what he wished done, and, except for a moment or two now and then, left him alone all day.

His job was to bank up a new pool, a hundred feet or so across, and this time he had to put sides to it, to take care of the overflow from the one he had made last night. This last he strengthened, raising the dam to nearly five feet high, and watched it carefully. As the new one grew, it took care of the oil that trickled over a low spot, purposely left in the old bank, and the squad of men managed to keep ahead of this trickle, so that, even when it began to come down in a regular stream, there was little or no oil lost.

So, for three days Red went along, his

farm forgotten, his whole energy in the work ahead. Then, toward evening of the fourth day, when the little pool was full, and there must have been a quarter-million of barrels in the larger one, the crash came.

The drought and dead air had hung on, the gulch getting ever fuller of gas, and all lights were prohibited. Guards were stationed in a wide ring around the place, and every one was warned. Preparations were being made to cap the flow and bring it under control when the accident came.

Red was hurled half-way up the hill, where his head struck a rock and his body lay doubled up on a little shelf. A semi-consciousness of a great sheet of flame and a quick lurch through the air was all. Then there seemed to be voices around him, he was pulled and hauled about, a great light shone around, and again all was black.

When he came to once more, his head was aching furiously and he lay indifferent to everything, till one familiar object after another forced itself on his attention, and he found that he was in his own shack. Somebody was talking outside, though the words woke no consciousness for awhile, then——

"I don't hold with these yere projeckings. That thar Irisher, he wanted me to go toting of a shovel too, but, no sah, and doggone glad I am of it. Lookit him lying thar with a busted head. Yes, sah! An' they's three on 'em killed, an' mighty nigh a dozen laid up. Some of 'em's burned to a crisp, I reckon."

So that was it. Yes, he remembered now. The explosion!

He made shift to sit up. At the sound a shadow darkened the door, and Dave entered, followed by another man.

"Wall, I reckon," broke out the kind-hearted Arkansan, "he's settin' up, 'most as peart-lookin' as ever."

"What's happened?" queried Red. "I remember flying up the hill, but that's about all. And you were talking of some one killed."

A workman in one of the shanties rolled a cigarette, then, with foolish carelessness, struck a match to light it, and the next moment the heavens were ablaze. The air of the valley was full of gas: it just exploded. This he gathered from the talk of the two.

"And the well?" he asked.

"Great day in the mornin'!" broke in the other man. "She's a-spoutin' flame mighty nigh a hundred feet into the air, an' that's a fact. Yes, sah! She sure is doin' that little thing."

"And the pools of oil?"

"Well!" drawled Dave, "them thar pools is a-puzzlin' more'n you an' me. Thar's a kinder notion as the reason they ain't cotched is because when the gas flared up, th' oil-well caught at th' top. Maybe it did, an' then again, maybe it didn't. Anyway, th' pools is safe enough, I reckon."

"They've been a-projeckin' roun' a pesky heap since then, tryin' ter get it under," said the other, "but I tell you, sah, it's like that thing in th' good Book, 'a pillar of fire by night;' that's what it surely is."

"Now you-all turn 'round and go ter sleep. They's some good chicken gumbo on th' stove, an' you-all's goin' to swaller it, an' then take a snooze. They's a knot on th' back of your haid, where you lammed th' rock, as a turkey hen might use for an egg. They's a letter on th' cheer for you, but I guess it ain't no hurry, an' kin wait a while," and good-natured Dave, fussing around as he chattered, brought a bowl of bread and soup to the cot, and Red ate ravenously. Then, lying back, he quickly fell asleep.

SOMETHING awoke him with a start, and he sat up in bed wondering what could be the matter. The windows were rattling, even then, so he knew it was no dream, and hustling on his clothes he went to the door and looked out. Another explosion, he thought, though of what he could not imagine, and, after looking out for a moment, he turned and went back.

A wash and some coffee made him feel more like a man, and then, remembering the letter, he took it off the chair and read it; it was from the girl, who told him that her father was dead. The short note was full of grief, and begged him to come home to her.

His face fell, and he started to his feet and was pacing back and forth, when another roar such as had waked him burst on the air. The house shook, and the windows rattled almost like a bombardment, and he listened for he knew not what, while his ragged nerves began to quiver.

"More gas, I suppose!" he muttered, but his thoughts were broken by the entrance of Dave, whose face was wreathed in its usual good-natured smile.

"They shore is mussing things up," he

grinned, taking a chair and tipping on to its hind legs, "with that there cannon."

"Cannon?" questioned Red, "cannon?"

"Yes, sah! They-uns is blowing holes in the rock-ribbed landscape ter beat two of a kind. It's a mighty positive fact that the man what's aiming it don't know how. But then, everybody stands behind, so I reckon they's safe if th' doggone thing don't bust."

"But what in Heaven's name are they firing a cannon at?"

"At the pillar of flame, I reckon. They-all can't get within a hundred or two yards of the oil-well, so they's tryin' ter blow th' top of the pipe off. I allow as maybe they may do it, but they shore has got to aim some closer than they's done yet."

It was nearly sunset before Red managed to get out, and then he was stiff and sore all over. But the exercise did him good, and he finally reached the brow of the hill from which he had looked at the well-drilling. Almost as he reached the spot, the sun sank, and in a few moments it was dark, or would have been, but for the light from the flaming well.

A grand sight spread before him. The derrick was, of course, burned out long ago, and the great column of burning oil shot up into the quickly darkening sky with a great roar and flame. For eighty feet or so it rushed, straight and true, without a break, one bright shaft that hurt the eyes to look at, and the heat could be felt at even that distance.

Off to one side lay the two pools of oil, shining red in the fierce light, and looking indescribably menacing and full of threat. Back a distance he could see the cannon, for the whole of the valley was light as day, every little detail being brought out plain and distinct by the great glare. Here and there knots of men were standing at a safe distance from the blaze. And on the tops of the hills were other scattered groups and single figures.

As he looked, the wonder grew that the two pools of oil should have escaped the explosion, but there they were, gleaming in the firelight, their three or four hundred thousand barrels safe, so far.

After standing a while, Red turned and went back to his shack, for he was still weak and sick from the tumbling of the explosion. The roar of the cannon awoke him again the next morning, and after a hasty breakfast he clapped on his hat and started over toward the well.

The foreman was standing back of it as he drew near, and grunted.

"So you got out all right, did ye? Well, you're luckier than many another poor boy, so ye are. You got some money coming to ye, but you can't get it now. Come——"

His voice was drowned in the roar of the cannon, only to rise again in a series of fluent profanities as the ball went wild.

"I don't believe you could hit a haystack," he told the one who was firing.

"Try it yourself then!" returned the man. "An eight-inch pipe at this distance ain't no cinch, I tell you."

It was not. For as much of the pipe as showed above the ground was red with heat, and then, as Red stood watching them load again, there came to his mind a fire he had seen somewhere else.

"Say," he broke in, laying a hand on the arm of the foreman, "it's a blamed good thing that he can't hit it! You'd have some swell time if he did."

"What do you think——"

"I don't think anything about it—I know! You think that if you hit the pipe with a cannon-ball it would cut off the supply long enough to let the flame travel up and out of the way. Don't believe it! There would only be a fraction of a second, while the cannon-ball was passing, and the gas would catch up with the flame again.

"One thing you would do, you'd scatter the fire all over the valley, and if you once do that, good night! You've got close to half a million barrels of oil in those two pools, and the ground around and every little twig and stick is soaked with it. How long do you suppose it would take the red-hot tip of that pipe to start the wood and ground to blazing, and once you get even a little blaze started, how long do you reckon it would be before the whole parish was in flames?"

The Irishman stood and listened to him, at first with a rather sarcastic smile, which slowly sobered to a thoughtful one, and, as Red finished he turned and surveyed the well. Many of the workmen had gathered round and were listening anxiously to the controversy.

"That settles me!" said the one who had been aiming the cannon. "I'm not looking for no job as a cherubim up on high. Not me! This guy seems to know what he's talking about; anyway, it sounds——"

"Who asked you to butt in?" snapped the foreman, turning around.

"If there ain't no explosion till you hit that pipe, I guess, by jabers, that we'll live some time yet. And who is you, young feller? You seem to know as much about oil as John D."

"Don't know a thing about oil," replied Red, "but I know about gas and I know about water. I've worked in both of them. You fellows forget that the force below is what is crowding that burning oil up in the air. Remove it once and the oil that is up drops. Do as you suggest—sever the column for a fraction of a second with a cannon-ball—the burning column has lost the force that holds it in the air, and drops. Then it meets the new rush shooting up, and the burning oil is scattered all over the valley."

"And we are it!" cried some one.

The foreman said nothing, only stood and looked thoughtfully at the pillar of flame. Then he ordered:

"Cut the cannon play! I guess this man knows what he's talking about. Not as it makes an awful lot of difference, 'cause I don't believe Bill 'ud hit it in a thousand years. What in the blue blazes we'll do now, gets me. I'm up against it!" And slowly he turned and walked away.

A moment or two Red stood, then went home. He was still stiff and sore, but a good night's sleep put him in a different case, and he was a new man when, after dropping a line to the girl, he strode over toward the oil-well.

THERE had been a change of bosses in the night. The man now in charge was a sleek, dapper young fellow of thirty-five or so, tall and muscular-looking, with an air of decision and finality about him. As Red came up, the newcomer was talking to the foreman, and his words snapped out with force and authority.

"Start to tunnel right here," he ordered, indicating a spot some six or seven hundred feet from the burning well, "and run the tunnel so we will hit the pipe about twenty or twenty-five feet below the ground. There is the cap now all ready to put on." And he pointed to a piece of machinery lying by.

With the instinct of the mechanic Red strolled over to the cap. It was a heavily built affair, in several parts, a collar to bolt round the pipe, a middle piece that screwed on the collar, and a top piece composed of a solid, heavy pair of jaws, pushed together with wonderfully powerful springs. The mechanism was plain. The springs forced the jaws over the pipe and shut off the flow of oil. The only thing he wondered about was how it was to be put on at twenty feet below the ground.

He found that this was the problem the Irishman was discussing as he returned, but the young man cut him short.

"Never mind that now," the latter was saying. "We'll find somebody when we get that far. Meantime, hire everybody you can to dig that tunnel. Give a dollar an hour if necessary. I'll get the timbers ready, for you'll have to shore up as you go along. Now get busy, for that fire is eating up fifty thousand dollars a day."

Then without another word he turned on his heel and walked swiftly away. At the same moment Red caught the eye of the foreman.

"I'm your man at a dollar an hour," he said, and, when the latter nodded, got a pick and shovel and again began to dig into the ground.

The big wages brought a crowd of men around, and soon the tunnel was traveling underground. About seven feet high and seven feet wide they made it, so that a double steady stream of men with wheelbarrows could work inside, one line going in empty, the other coming out with barrows full of dirt. At the end of the tunnel, a gang dug ahead, while another kept close behind with timbers, shoring up the roof to protect the workers.

And so the work went forward, day and night, till at last the pipe was exposed. Slowly they worked around, leaving it standing alone in the midst of the chamber, a solitary column, black and sinister.

The rush of the oil was so great, that if one laid his ear against it, it almost deafened him.

Then the cap was carried in, and then came a pause. Work stopped, and for a space the men hung around, seated on the ground or on the overturned wheelbarrows, talking among themselves.

Slowly it began to be whispered about that no one would attempt to cut the pipe and set the cap. Most of the men drew their money and departed, Red among them, hugging his nearly forty dollars tightly. It meant much to him, and he had worked long hours to make it.

And then all the light and hope went out of his life. In his mail-box was a letter from his mother telling again of the death of the girl's father, and how her family were pinched financially.

"His insurance had lapsed some time," she wrote, "and they have got nothing from it. Milly is sick with nervous shock, and can not work, and they are in sad need. I am sure I do not know how they make out at all." Then a little farther on, "I suppose I ought to tell you that her mother is urging her to marry young Arnold. He is around there every night, and his saloon is prosperous. I think I would come home, or she may marry him from a sense of duty," and so on.

Red went heartsick. All night he tossed around, trying to find some way out. But things looked black, and his thoughts were bitter, desperate.

Restless and unhappy, he went down to the well almost as soon as he awoke next morning, for the mere fact of being alone was a strain, and he wished for a crowd to lose himself in.

The foreman, Flanagan, was standing staring down the tunnel, and turned at the sound of footsteps. He nodded slightly, then swung 'round again, and continued, as before, looking down the long slope.

For a time they stood side by side.

"What's the trouble?" queried Red, at length.

"Trouble, is it? Faith, it's keeping out of trouble that's making that same," returned the other, "and small blame to anybody for it."

"What do you mean?"

"What do I mean? Why, the tunnel's made; the pipe's there; the cap's by the side of it. But the boy to do the trick, he—begorra, is some other place."

"Oh! I see! Nobody wants the job."

"Nobody is right, and small blame to them!" And he turned a repellent shoulder.

For quite a space the two stood there, gazing down the black hole, then Red turned and looked around at the scene.

Off in front was the well, its great mass of flame showing even in the bright daylight; away to the right was the first pool of oil that he had worked so hard to dam, and below that, round a bend in the valley a corner of the second one showed. Dotted here and there along the gulch were many derricks, while, holding all together, as it might be, were the two walls of the valley.

And as he looked, a thought slowly formed in his mind, an idea that came with a sudden cold feeling and passed again, leaving him chilled and thoughtful.

"What's wrong with the job?" he asked presently, and was surprised to find his voice hoarse and husky.

"Death's what's wrong with it," replied Flanagan shortly.

"And what do they offer?"

"At first it was five hundred, now it's two thousand. What it'll be tomorrow, I don't know."

Then suddenly swinging on his heel, he fixed his sharp blue eyes on Red, and examined him slowly and carefully.

"Don't be a darned fool," he said at last. "You don't need money as bad as that."

"I need it terribly, desperately!" Red blurted out in a shamefaced manner. "I came down here to farm and get independent, but it's a fool failure. And there's a girl! I can't keep her waiting forever. Her father's just died."

The foreman turned away again and stood gazing once more down the incline, then swung round suddenly, and there was a different look in those blue eyes.

"Lookee here, lad!" he began, "I'm not doing my duty to the company, but I am advising you, begorra, for I hate to see the like of you taking such a chance. It's a million to one against you coming out of that hole alive. D'ye hear me? I'm no coward, but I got a family, and there's a bunch of roughnecks round here that's been up against 'most everything. If we back up, well—no, it's too much of a chance, I tell you. Forget it, lad, forget it!"

Red stood quivering and anxious. His life! What good was it as a failure? Two thousand dollars! It would give him a new start! Back and forward he swung, then the thought of Arnold with his prosperous saloon came.

With a sudden shake, he pulled himself together and looked up.

"Thank you, Flanagan," he said simply, "but I guess I'll take a chance. Things are not so rosy that I can afford to be choice," he added with a bitter laugh. "Who do I see about it?"

The blue eyes bored into him, then a great hand reached over and rested on his shoulder.

"Made up your mind, lad?" Red nodded. "Then strike for five thousand, and stick. Here's the boss now. Stick!" he whispered, and straightened up.

"Mr. Dickee!" he called. And when the young man came over, "This boy wants to cap the pipe," he said, and walked away.

Now that he was committed to the work, Red found that he was strangely cool and calm. Mr. Dickee took him to the office, and here he offered to cut the pipe and cap it for five thousand dollars, and though they laughed at him, and argued, he stuck, and so the bargain was finally made.

If he failed he was to get nothing. If he succeeded, and lived, he was to receive five thousand dollars; if he died, successful, it was to be paid to his mother. Then after a long letter to the girl, to be sent if he was killed, he started for the tunnel.

OUTSIDE he was received in a dead silence. It struck him that these men were attending his funeral, and the thought brought a cold chill. But he set his teeth and went resolutely onward.

Some one thrust a flask into his hand as he passed, and he arrived at the opening, holding it before him, to find Flanagan and a helper waiting.

"I don't want this stuff," he said, and started to throw the flask away, but the Irishman caught his hand and stopped him.

"Kape it, lad, kape it! A drop of whisky is sometimes worth a lot in a job like this."

Red put it in his pocket. Then, with a last look around on the earth and the blue sky, he followed the two into the tunnel.

Dark and dismal and gloomy it was, the shoring timbers looking like the ribs of some long-dead reptile, as he walked along after the other two. He watched them fasten the collar, and set the springs, then Flanagan turned and, sending the other man out, pulled a coil of rope from a corner.

"There's the files and the sledge," he said, "and now tie the end of this round you. It may do some good if things go wrong. Do it," he ordered, and, as Red obeyed, he stuck out a mighty paw, gave a crushing grip, and taking the other end of the rope with him left without another word.

Temple stood and watched him out of sight up the tunnel, saw him step into the sunshine two hundred yards away, then turned and stared at the pipe. And as he looked, the desire to be off with this job grew upon him. As Flanagan said, it was a toss-up with death, and the odds immeasurably against him, and now, brought face to face with the danger, life looked sweet. Again he glanced up the six-hundred-foot incline wistfully at the light reflected from above.

"I am a dirty coward," he said. "A few days ago, when I thought I was a failure, I would just as soon have died as not. Now, when I have the chance to make a stake, I am scared of the risk. Of course, the chances are I'm going to drown, and drowning in crude oil must be a rotten death, but —oh, shucks, it will put Mother on Easy Street, and set Milly free for good. As for myself—well, I should worry. I might as well be dead, anyhow."

With the return of his pessimism he stepped forward and began to examine the pipe. An eight-inch one it was, up which the oil was rushing, and he felt it and tapped it. He had seen many such above, and as he remembered, they ran about five-eighths of an inch thick. Five-eighths of an inch to file through, evenly, around the pipe, then a few blows with the sledge to knock the top part away, the jaws of the cap would close, the flow would be stopped, and five thousand dollars would be his; or the jaws would not stem the tide, and he would be drowned like a rat in a hole.

If it didn't go quite right, well! they would fish him out of the oil, dead, some time later. For he knew perfectly that the slightest mistake, filing a little thinner in one spot, for example, would let loose a force of oil upon him from which there could be no escape. Not the least possibility. He would be submerged, engulfed, annihilated.

Grimly he picked a file and set to work, trying as much as possible to keep an even cut all around; not to get any one point deeper than another. He realized that should the casing get weak in any place, or a flaw or a blow-hole show up, there would likely be a burst of oil that would overwhelm him. So it was with infinite care that he kept the file-cut even and true, gaging by the light of his electric flash every little cut he made.

And soon it began to sink deeper into the iron, an eighth, a quarter, three-eighths, a half-an-inch deep. And then his mouth grew dry, and he swallowed continually, while his hand became nervous and unsteady.

Each cut now might find him through; each touch of the file might bring him to the oil. A thousand things might happen, any of which would be his end.

He stopped, let his arms sag, and the file fall to the floor. Then he bethought him of the flask, and reaching in his hip pocket he pulled it forth and took a heavy pull.

His nerves steadied a trifle by the spirits, he picked up the file with a grim smile, and went back to his task once more.

Presently he stopped again, examined the cut with care, stood for a moment looking up the tunnel to the outer world, then, with a grim setting of his jaw, picked up the sledge and struck a violent blow at the upper portion of the pipe.

He might as well have struck so much rock. It hardly shivered. Once again he began to file. And then a little later took up the sledge again. The pipe itself seemed loose, though it did not move.

With the sharp end of the file he tested the cut. It was thin as paper. The file went through and was almost snatched from his hand. When he pulled it out a gush of oil caught him in the face.

A moment he thought, wondering why the upper pipe did not move when struck with the sledge. Then the reason began to dawn upon him. He remembered having heard that in the new style turbines the water rush is so great that even an ax-blade has no effect upon it. And it was the column of oil, packed solid as a rock, that was keeping the pipe upright, by pressure from the force below.

Another blow he struck with all his might. The column shivered, but that was all.

Then a furious rage took hold of him. Lifting the sledge, he struck blow after blow upon the pipe, struck in a fury, shouting at the top of his voice and raving aloud, till presently a piece broke out of the pipe, and the oil began to squirt in a fierce stream. Striking him in the face, it plucked him from his feet, and dashed him against the shoring timbers.

In some way, he worked around to the other side of the pipe, got to his feet again, and found that he still clutched the heavy sledge.

What happened after that he hardly knew, except that he seemed fighting in a sort of nightmare, striking, cursing, and swinging in a rage, while the oil spattered on him from the walls, and an ever-rising pool was on the floor. His feet were covered. It was crawling to his knees, and he seemed powerless.

He sobbed as he struck, and a great despair seized him. Life was slipping from his grasp. Fear of death clutched his heart, and, with a last desperate rally, he swung the heavy sledge as if it was a feather, and rained blow after blow upon the pipe.

His resolution was failing, and all that he was doing was with a sort of desperation, a nervous reaction, from the time when he had gritted his teeth and closed his eyes against the danger that he knew was there. Now that all hope seemed to have gone, his nerves exploded, took charge of both mind and body, and his movements were both violent and erratic.

Then, of a sudden, the whole world seemed to give way. He was struck down, tossed aloft, hurled around, pitched about, and engulfed. A horrible roaring was in his ears, a terrible fury of sound, a din that felt physical in its pressure, and that thrust him down into the oily sea that almost filled the tunnel.

One moment he struck the floor, the next, scraped the ceiling, then was battered from side to side, like a chip in a mill-stream. Life seemed a little thing to fight for. The infinite weariness of him yearned for the quietness of death. Then, of a sudden, came peace.

All was still, quiet and intense. He could die now, for he had accomplished something, though he did not know what; both brain and body were worn out.

THEN came a tug on the rope around his body, and he felt himself pulled toward the opening. Half-conscious he resisted. Was that turmoil to begin again?

But faster came the pull. His legs gave way. Everything went black. He sank to the ground, unconscious, and so they drew him up and saved him.

It was hours later that he awoke in his own bed. Flanagan and Dave were sitting near.

"Did I do it?" he questioned weakly.

"Bedad you did!" replied the foreman. "The flow's shut off, the fire's out, and your money's waiting at the office."

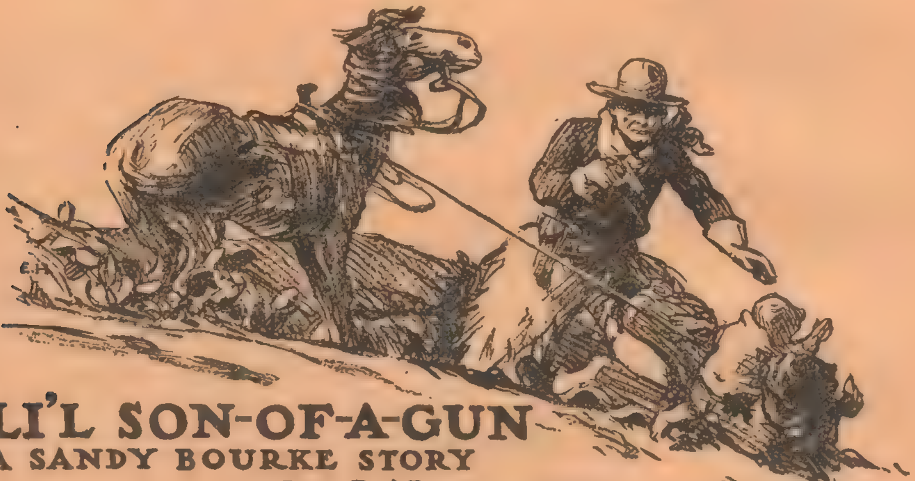
As in a dream, Red looked at the two

men, then the meaning of the Irishman's words seeped slowly through his awakening brain.

He had succeeded! A delicious feeling—the feeling of a man who has won—ran through his veins, filling them with strength and vigor, rousing him and sweeping clear his mind.

He thrilled with purpose. The dangers he had run were forgotten. And his thoughts turned to Milly, but with her image came that of Arnold. He ground his teeth, set his chin, and with a quick movement sat up in bed.

"Here!" he cried, kicking off the bed-covers, and turning to the astonished watchers. "Give me my clothes. I've got to catch the next train north."



LI'L SON-OF-A-GUN

A SANDY BOURKE STORY

by J. ALLAN DUNN

Author of "The Gold Lust," "The Island of the Dead," etc.

"STAN' still, you Pete, you! Howd' you-all expec' me to catch him with you pawin' an' raisin' a dust?"

Pete, favorite mount of Sandy Bourke, foreman of the Curly O, thus admonished, looked at his master with up-pricked ears and luminous, understanding eyes, snorted once in protest of his enforced idleness in a thicket of high-stemmed, leafless "fence-post" cactus, and stood quietly.

Sandy resumed his search for the elusive quarry which had shown itself once and then hidden in some cavity of the weathered trunks.

"You-all had betteh surrendeh, li'l bird," said Sandy, "for I shore need you as a present fo' li'l son-of-a-gun. I ain't goin' to huht you none. Ah! Got ye." And his gantleted hand brought forth a protesting, tiny bunch of feathers, biting at the glove and blinking at the sunlight, presently resolving itself into a flustered but resigned birdlet, the dwarf cactus-owl of the dry belt.

Sandy pondered a minute over his capture, then stuffed the bottom of the empty rifle-holster on his saddle with his bandanna neckerchief, deposited the owl in it carefully as in a nest and capped the holster with dried mesquite.

"I don' know as he can play with you much," he said, tucking in the brush, "but dolls is awful sca'ce hereabouts an' yo're shore an amusin' li'l cuss, ef it's only to look at, for the li'l son-of-a-gun."

The li'l son-of-a-gun was the two-year-old son of Barbara Redding, daughter of Superintendent Barton of the Curly O, now on a visit to the li'l son-of-a-gun's grandfather and only grandparent, from the Redding standard-cattle ranch at Boville, on the Pecos River, New Mexico.

Sandy, who had been best man at the wedding, was one of John Redding, Junior's,

—full name John Barton Redding—godfathers. This was the first time he had seen his charge since the christening.

The cowboy had thought but lightly of his responsibilities until the baby, a week before, had toddled his way across the ranch-house veranda into Sandy's heart by way of his forefinger, which the child had confidently clutched, looking into Sandy's frankly admiring face with a "*g-r-r, goo!*" that brought forth from his delighted godfather the softly reiterated title, "The li'l son-of-a-gun; the li'l son-of-a-gun!"

Sandy Bourke had broken all of his own records by staying on the Curly O for over three years, most of the time as foreman. Superintendent Barton had begun to hopefully regard him as a fixture, but the touch of his godson's clinging fingers had roused a yearning in Sandy's heart-strings which he thought to assuage by his universal panacea for all trouble not physical — moving on.

Sandy, tender-hearted, yet woman-shy, as some dogs dread gunshot despite their instincts, called it the "saddle itch" and styled himself as born with the "roving heel." In his heart he longed for a hearthside of his own, half conscious that he wanted some one to tend it for him, yet, unless his chivalry conquered his timidity, the threatened propinquity of a girl or the neighborhood of anything approaching sentiment found him hopelessly embarrassed, or, as he called it, "hog-tied an' helpless."

He had never been in love with Barbara Barton, but her romance, and its consequent wedding, had taken place under his eyes and in his heart, and found the latter lonesome. The fingers of the li'l son-of-a-gun had fixed his determination to apply his remedy.

He had resolved to put his savings and some well-earned extra sums and windfalls into a ranch in Wyoming, upon which he had long set his dreams, a place of open range and sheltered pasturage amid the hills, where a crystal trout-stream ran the year round, willow-set, across open upland or through outcropping prairie.

His two saddle-chums, Mormon Peters and Sodawater Sam Manning, were to go with him as minor partners, as soon as the Spring round-up was over on the Curly O. Close pals were the three, of tested friendship—the only kind worth having—and the triumvirate, known as the "Three Musketeers of the Range," were looking forward to the pride of self-ownership.

Sandy mounted Pete and jogged out of the cactus thicket ranchward. As he dropped easily down the slope toward the draw at the top of which stood the Curly O headquarters, he saw a horseman riding furiously toward him, and halted Pete for better inspection.

"It's Mormon," he muttered, "burnin' leatheh to beat the band. He ought to be plumb ashamed of hisself with his weight on that li'l hawss. An' no hat! He must be shore locoed."

The man, an overstout cowboy — the Porthos of the trio — in blue shirt and leather *chaparejos*, galloped up, the pony covered with lather, his own bald head smoking with the evaporation of its sweat under the noon sun. He reined up with staring eyes and working lips about a tongue that refused to perform its office.

"What's eatin' you?" asked Sandy. "Quit makin' motions with yore hands. I ain't a deef-an'-dumb asylum. Hev' you got a sunstroke? Talk, darn you, talk!"

"The kid!" gasped Mormon.

"Talk!" shouted the exasperated Sandy.

Mormon gulped and moistened his lips.

"Swiped! Kidnaped!" he cried.

"When? Where? Talk as we go."

Sandy wheeled Pete by the side of Mormon's panting pony.

"Off'n the verandy, 'bout an hour ago," said Mormon. "Sam's gone to Rubio to raise a posse an' wire Redding. Barton's prit' nigh——"

But Pete, urged by unusual spurs, was flying up the draw, drumming the brown turf in great strides, his belly close to the ground.

"Move along there, hawss!" cried Sandy, low in his saddle. "Move along! Kidnaped! The pore li'l son-of-a-gun!"

II

CURLY O headquarters was in confusion. A dozen cowboys stood aimlessly about, watching the ranch-house, their ponies idle by the corral fence. One of them walked over to Sandy as he dismounted.

"We've rode all roun' lookin' for trail," he said, "but we can't find no sign."

"Then of course they ain't any," replied Sandy with a note of sarcasm in his voice that seemed lost on the cow-hand. "Got them yearlings up?"

"Yep."

"Then brand 'em. You ain't helpin' things any, talkin' about it. Where's Misteh Barton?"

"In the house."

Sandy went toward the main house, Pete following, nosing at his shoulder.

"Stan' there, hawss," admonished Sandy, dropping the reins over the pony's neck in the shade of an alamo-tree. "I wish some of them punchers had yore brains. Not one of 'em knows a jack-rabbit track from a woodchuck's, an' they've rode circus oveh any trail they was."

He paused before the front veranda, Stetson in hand. A window was open and the sound of a woman's sobs were plainly audible.

A look of distress came into Sandy's face and he scratched at his tawny crop of hair in perplexity. Then he set his lean jaw, bringing out the muscle-bosses underneath the temples, and entered the house.

Barbara Redding was kneeling on the floor, her head buried in the lap of a matronly negress who patted her hair, repeating over and over the same sentence.

"Theah now, honey, it'll all come right, pray de Lawd! Yes indeedy, honey lamb."

Superintendent Barton, gray-haired, his face overlined with worry, was pacing up and down the room, a little teddy-bear doll swinging aimlessly in his right hand. His eyes lighted as he saw Sandy at the door.

"Ah, Bourke," he said, "I thought they'd never find you."

Barbara Redding raised her tear-stained face from the colored woman's knees.

"Sandy!" she cried. "You'll find him, Sandy? My baby—my baby!"

"Shore we'll find him," assured Sandy. "Don't you take on so, Miss Bahba'a. How'd it all happen, Misteh Barton?"

"It was all my fault," declared Barbara Redding. "I'd put baby on the veranda, out of the sun. He was sleepy, but he wanted his teddy-bear." Her eyes overflowed as she noted the plaything that her harassed father still unconsciously held. "I went in to get it—" she struggled to choke down her sobs—"and mammy was asking me about some of his little things she was going to wash."

"Theah now, honey, theah now, li'l lamb," said the negress, as Barbara broke down again.

"You jest git a good grip on yo'self, Miss Bahba'a," said Sandy. "We'll find him."

"Yes, Barbara," said her father, "be brave."

"There's nothing more to tell," his daughter answered him. "I'm — trying to be brave. When I went out again—in about fifteen minutes—he was gone from his crib. I called father——"

"That's all there is to it, I think, Sandy," said Barton. "I ran round the house and there was no one in sight. The men were over at the corral and they rode off to look for sign while Mormon was after you. I was going to send them out on a circuit when you came up."

"M-mh," said Sandy. "That won't do much good, to have them whooping all over the country as if they was on a coyote drive. They's only one way anybody could have come up an' got away without bein' seen, an' that's through Salt Cañon an' by the barns. Got any idea who did it?"

"No, I can't imagine."

"I can," said Sandy. "Remember the nester you ran off the creek-bottomland 'count of his having fresh beef that he didn't own an' couldn't have paid fo'? I found the hide with the brand cut out of it. You let him go, 'count of his having a sick wife?"

"Hammond? Yes."

"He and his sick wife rode thirty miles into Rubio the nex' day without seemin' to huht her none," said Sandy grimly. "They're in with a tough crowd now, chummin' with the Mexicans in Spanishtown. An' they's been a heap of talk about gettin' even with the Curly O. I didn't pay much attention to what I heard in Rubio. I've heard talk before. But I didn't figgeh on it breakin' this way."

Sandy's face was set and his gray eyes hard and glittering.

"My baby!" moaned Barbara. "He'll die. They'll starve him."

"They ain't goin' to huht him any," said Sandy. "They'll be scared to, knowin' they'd have the whole State of Texas after 'em if they huht a hair of his li'l head. I know that brand of skunks. They'll want a ransom—that's their game, but they won't huht the baby."

"I'll pay anything they ask," said Barton distractedly, "anything. I've sent Sam to town to notify the sheriff and wire to Redding. But you know that."

"Yes, sir," answered Sandy. "Let's get busy. Don't you worry none, Miss Bahba'a. We'll have him back safe and sound in no time."

Barbara Redding rose to her feet.

"I trust you, Sandy," she said, holding out her hand. "Boy's father isn't here——"

Her voice trembled and she caught her lower lip between her teeth.

Sandy took the nervous little hand in his own strong, lean fingers and smiled at her.

"Shore you can trust me," he said. "Ain't I his godfatheh?"

Once outside he drew a deep breath of relief and led the way to the office, the usually brisk and decided superintendent following dejectedly.

" 'Pears like I can't breathe, think or talk when they's wimmin in trouble," said Sandy to himself. "All a man can do is to say he's sorry and make promises."

He turned to Barton, sitting by his desk.

"The sheriff an' his bunch can't get here till afteh dark, Mr. Barton," he said. "I ain't overstrong on posses. You can hear or see 'em comin' for ten miles as if they was a circus parade. Swear in a lot of fellers that mean well an' ain't got a lick o' sense when it comes down to this sort of work. We may need 'em at a pinch, but they's betteh ways of handlin' this. You see they ain't goin' to be mo' than two or three of 'em with Hammond in this kidnapin' proposition, 'count of the split-up. Me an' Mormon an' Sam, if he gets back in time, can handle Misteh Hammond an' his pals very nicely.

"Now they's two things to do. One fo' you an' one fo' me. I'm goin' out to try an' pick up trail. You stay heah an' cheer up Miss Bahba'a—Mrs. Redding, I mean—an' wait fo' somethin' to break about the ransom. They'll be some kind of a message comin' along soon. Mebbe befo' dark, mebbe after. If you catch sight of the man who brings it, have him followed. Send Peters, he's got a good hawss an' some brains. Don't hold the man—trail him. Don't let any of the boys scare him off. He may lead Peters to somethin' we can lay hold of.

"If you think it's goin' to ease Miss—Mrs. Redding—any, let the boys go out scoutin', but I'd advise against it. It'll worry her sick to have them comin' in one at a time an' say they ain't found anythin'. Besides, if I strike somethin' I may need all of 'em fresh."

"I'll take your advice, Sandy," said Barton. "I wish I'd taken it about Hammond in the first place."

"He'll be in jail anyway 'fore the week's out," assured Sandy. "I'm off. You keep yore eyes open for the message. That's their play—ransom."

He walked quickly from the office to where Pete awaited him, and sprang into the saddle.

"That'll give him somethin' to do and keep him from thinkin' too much, anyway, Pete," he said, as he cantered over to the corral. "Oh, Mormon!"

The stout cowboy came over to the fence.

"Ain't they nothin' *we* kin do, Sandy?" he asked. "They don't seem no sense in goin' ahead brandin'. The boys don't know an iron from a rope."

"If Barton sends 'em out, Mormon, you tell 'em to scatteh an' keep away from Salt Cañon. Tell 'em to keep clear of the ranch till I come back. You stick aroun'. You an' Sam an' me's goin' to take a hand in this by our lonesomes, I think. Don't let any excited idiot take Pete. I'm changin' to Goldie, an' I'll need him fresh later. Get yore hawss rested up good an' save a mount for Sam. Give 'em all three some grain. I'm goin' to put Pete in the barn."

Sandy turned Pete loose in a stall and transferred his saddle to his second-string pony, a bright bay mare.

He passed between the spacious outbuildings and followed a stream that led into a pocket cañon, rapidly narrowing with mounting cliffs till there was barely room to pass dry-shod along the stony borders of the creek.

SANDY set the mare at a swift walk, her hoofs ringing on the rocks.

"This thing must have been thought out," said Sandy, talking half to himself, half to his mount, as was his wont. "Timed it too. 'Leven o'clock with no one about the ranch an' the kid alone on the verandy. They may have been layin' round for two or three days for the right minnit. If anybody'd seen 'em—it's a cinch it wasn't Hammond—they'd have been lookin' fo' work!"

Presently he crossed the stream and dismounted at the foot of a narrow trail that gave the only exit to the rim of the cañon.

"This is the only way out, hawss," he said as he scrutinized the ground closely for dislodged shale or pebbles.

Suddenly he straightened up with a grunt and remounted.

"Up you go, lady," he said, setting the mare at the steep cliff.

She went at it like a cat, half scrambling, half leaping up the dim trail with straining haunches.

At the top Sandy halted. A plateau sloped southward, set with clumps of chapparal and tall cactus thickets. To north and west were scattered mesas of upstanding cliff, rapidly assembling into a more solid wall, the ramparts of barren mountains. Far to the south some blue hills lifted in Mexico, beyond the Rio Grande.

Sandy set the mare at a fox-trot, following readily the marks of a hurriedly ridden horse, showing plainly to his practised eyes in the loose, shallow soil. Presently he reined in. Two more sets of hoof-marks had come from the maze of a cactus thicket to join the first.

"Pretty open trail?" mused Sandy. "They must have reckoned on a good staht."

In the distance a faint, yellowish cloud was hovering close to the ground.

Sandy slapped his thigh.

"Dust!" he exclaimed. "They've stampeded the cattle. Some one's got brains in that outfit. I thought that trail was too open to be right."

He set the willing mare to a gallop in the direction of the cloud. In half an hour it was close upon him, shifting and slowly clearing in the still, hot air. Soon he was riding in a mêlée of tracks in which the ones he was following were indistinguishably intermingled. The mare snorted at the sting of the dust in her open nostrils as they reached the dissipating cloud, and lengthened her stride as they passed from soil on to a stony floor, paved roughly with blocks of chalcedony.

In half an hour more he reached the herd of steers, bearing the brand of the Curly O ("Q"), badly blown, their eyes still staring, slowly drifting back to their home feeding-grounds at the mouth of Salt Creek Cañon.

Sandy groaned.

"That lets us out, Goldie, hawss," he said. "Goin' south, they was. If they've crossed the Rio it's goin' to complicate mattehs. Then, again, it may be a bluff. They may have ridden out anywheres for five mile back, an' doubled to the mountains."

He kept on to where the cattle had milled before they started homeward, and rode in a wide arc in the hope of finding patches of softer topsoil that might hold trail. But there were none to be found, and Sandy reluctantly turned ranchward.

"They's still the ransom to work on, Goldie, hawss," he said. "That's the best bet of the layout, anyways. Move along, li'l hawss. I wonder if he's hungry, the pore li'l son-of-a-gun."

III

IT WAS getting dusk when Sandy reached the ranch. As he rode round the barns, Barton and Mormon ran toward him.

He leaned from the saddle at the sight of their excited faces.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Come to the office," said Barton. "Barbara's lying down. We've got a message.

"Mexican Joe brought it," he went on. "You know him?"

"Man that's been cuttin' firewood on the A-bar-A?"

Barton nodded.

"He brought this," he said. "Claimed a man he didn't know gave him a dollar to bring it to me."

"What time?" asked Sandy, taking the square of paper.

"He rode in about an hour ago. The man met him on the road five miles down," he said. "I gave him another dollar and he left. Peters is trailing him."

"That's good," said Sandy. "He may run on to somethin', though I doubt it. This thing's been planned. Probably that Mexican's mixed up with it. No tellin'. Anyway they ain't aimin' to leave open trails. I lost mine in a bunch of our cattle."

He went to the window for better light, reading the note aloud:

> Dere sir weve got the kid. If you reckon him worth five thousand dollars you fetch it to Chimney Rock termorrer and leav it on the ledg at the bottom of the rock. Come as soon as you like after sunup. Not before. Dont bring no one with you neither. If the coast is cleer we git the munney and you git the kid inside of twenty fore hours. Better you let us git clear or you dont git the kid. Over.

The other side of the sheet bore eight scrawling words—

> We wont hurt the kid if you hurry.

"I haven't got five hundred dollars on the ranch, much less five thousand," said Barton. "I can get it in Rubio, I suppose, and get back before sunup."

Sandy was sitting on the office desk, musing.

"Chimney Rock," he said. "I knew they was some one with brains in that outfit. They ain't a spear of coveh fo' a mile either ways of it. No place between the Chimney an' the mountains fo' anything bigger 'n a horn' toad to squat. Hm-m——"

He broke off, scratching his head perplexedly.

"I'll get the money," said Barton. "I can drive down in three hours, raise it, get a fresh horse and come back with Redding. He'll be in on the night train."

"Made up your mind to pay the ransom?" asked Sandy.

Barton, who had recovered much of his poise and decisive action, nodded.

"I've got to trust them," he said. "Barbara would never forgive me, or Redding, if I didn't take the risk. Five thousand doesn't mean much, Sandy, in a case like this."

"No objection if I get it back—an' the baby?" asked Sandy.

Barton looked at him. The cowboy had lit a cigarette and was watching the smoke as he exhaled it.

"They's no moon tonight, is they?" asked Sandy.

"Moon! I'd drive through pitch," said Barton a trifle testily. "What's the moon got to do with it? Of course I trust you, Sandy, but I'd rather have the money paid, ten times over, than endanger the life of that baby."

"You know me, Misteh Barton," said Sandy, quietly walking over to his superintendent and facing him. "I ain't goin' to do nothin' to gum up the cards in this game. The hand's goin' to be played out at Chimney Rock. If my scheme don't work, I'll know long befo' mornin', an' you can go ahead with the deal.

"You'll meet the posse on the way. Don't tell the sheriff about the note from the Mexican unless you have to. Tell Sam to repoht to me. We've got to keep them an' our boys away from Chimney Rock in any case. Long's you've decided to pay the money you've got to have that neighbo'hood clear of any one 'cept yourself from the time it's light till they come fo' the money.

"Let's get something to eat. We'll all need it. Then you hitch up an' staht fo' Rubio."

"My God, Sandy!" exclaimed Barton, grasping his foreman's hand, his face very old in the afterglow despite the ruddy reflection that poured in through the window. "It's going to be hard to wait. But I promised Barbara I'd pay the ransom. I couldn't face her if—if——"

"Neither could I," answered Sandy. "I ain't got all my plans figgehed out just yet, but I've got an idea. I don't intend to let that li'l son-of-a-gun be kep' away from his motheh more'n one night."

IV

A LITTLE after midnight strange sounds issued from the black gullet of the ravine that was the only entrance to the roughly triangular, barren plain in the center of which was the weather-sculptured column of sandstone known as Chimney Rock. A scraping shuffle and the occasional tinkle of steel hoof upon flinty rock proclaimed the passage of horses through the draw.

The stars glittered brightly in the rare air. The cliff walls were vaguely distinguishable. Hugging close to the left-hand wall, three horsemen trotted briskly along until they had reached midway of that side of the triangle, disappearing into a narrow cleft that led back some fifteen feet, then angled sharply for about the same distance.

There was a short pause, then one horse, carrying double, emerged from the cliff. Behind it, attached to the saddle-horn by ropes, dragged a bundle of dried mesquite, obliterating all tracks as it swept the hard plain. The two riders were silent as they headed their mount for the dim loom of the sandstone column, a mile away.

Arrived at it, the horse was led upon the ledge and close to the pillar. One man mounted, kneeling. then standing in the saddle. Clinging like a lizard to the crevices and bosses of the column, he disappeared over the parapet at the summit. A lariat came flickering down, to which the second rider attached a rifle, which was drawn carefully up.

The man at the base of Chimney Rock remounted and rode back cliffward, the brush of dried mesquite still trailing behind the horse.

SUPERINTENDENT BARTON, weary-eyed and saddle-worn, loped his roan across the plain toward Chimney Rock. In his breast was a wallet with five thousand dollars in bills gathered hastily from friends and sympathizers in Rubio.

Back at the Curly O was the sheriff's posse, strongly disapproving of the payment of the ransom, but persuaded to wait the twenty-four hours before commencing a universal search for the kidnapers, and Redding, endeavoring to comfort his distracted wife, who counted the minutes that must pass before her baby was restored to her in a desperate effort at calmness, based in no small measure on confidence in Sandy Bourke, long since established.

As Barton rode toward the column, the fingers of the rising sun, diffidently touching the summits of the cliffs, crept down until the rose mantle covered the purple vestment of the night. Chimney Rock sent a long shadow westward as he laid the wallet with the money on the ledge that formed the base of the pillar, and, with a sigh, turned back to the ranch.

Out from the cliffs, following the pointer of the column's shadow, came a man on a calico pony, *serape* wrapped against the chilly dawn, smoking a cigarette as his dark eyes, beady and glittering as those of a rattlesnake, surveyed the plain.

He smoked out one cigarette and replaced it, dropping his fingers again to the rifle he carried across the pommel of his saddle.

"No signs of trouble," he muttered to himself in Mexican. "And the gringo fool has left the money. Good!"

"Hands up!"

The astounded Mexican reined in instinctively at the sharp command that seemed to have fallen from the sky.

"*Buene diez, hombre,*" said a smoothly mocking voice. "Here I am. Hoist yo' hands!"

Sancho Padilla turned his beady eyes upward to where the muzzle of a Winchester protruded from the parapet of Chimney Rock. It seemed to be targeted between his black brows. The morning light was clear and his eyesight good. He could distinguish the unwavering sight, and, back of it, a pair of eyes that held a menacing gleam.

"*Madre de Dios!*" he muttered, started to cross himself involuntarily, and stopped the motion with a shudder.

Out from the eastern cliffs raced three horses, two of them mounted, the third following free, its reins behind the saddle-horn.

Padilla's eyes glanced rapidly from side to side as Mormon and Sam covered him on right and left.

"Git down!" cried the voice from the top of the rock. "Coveh him, Mormon! Sam, come oveh here an' steady this rope."

Sandy swiftly descended the column and shook the loop of his lariat from the projection about which he had snubbed it. Then he rolled a cigarette and lit it, inhaling luxuriously, seated on the ledge beside the wallet that Barton had left.

"Didn't dare to smoke one all night," he said. "Tie him up good, Sam. Now hombre, you an' me's goin' to hold a li'l conversation."

Half an hour later, the disgruntled Padilla, his arms tied behind him, rode reluctantly toward the cliffs whence he had come, escorted by the three cowboys, who regaled him with threats of reprisal in case of treachery.

"I've seen both of 'em," summed up Sandy in a casual tone. "Afteh the men had cashed in, but I neveh officiated—*yet.* I don't know which lasts the longest. 'Pends on the weather."

"We might sew him up in a green hide, that depends on the time of day as to how quick it dries up. Or we might find a rattler an' leash him to a saddle-strip. You see," he addressed the shuddering Mexican directly, "we buries you, up to the neck, an' pegs out the rattler just out of reach. At sight of yore ugly face he natcherly gits mad an' tries to stick his fangs in it. Mebbe a cloudburst comes along an' soaks the strip. Then it's oveh in a hurry. If it keeps dry, yo're apt to be uncomf't'ble a while longer.

"Mebbe we can think up somethin' betteh. The point is, if you don't take us *pronto* to where Hammond and yore other skunk of a pardner's hidin' out with the kid, something's goin' to happen to you-all. *Sabe?*"

"*Madre de Dios! Madre de Dios!*" repeated Padilla, his face tallow-hued, his teeth chattering. "I show you. Then you let me go?"

Sandy looked at him with open contempt.

"You set a heap mo' value on yore hide than it's worth," he said. "You can *vamose* afteh we git the kid, but don't make any mistakes."

The Mexican shot an evil look at his captor from his narrow-slitted eyes and shrugged his bound shoulders as he answered:

"*Bueno. Yo sabe.*"

V

THE sun was well up when the three cowboys and their unwilling guide neared the western verge of the big tableland. The ground was hard and rocky with but little vegetation, outcrops of weathered stone forming the only shade. They found a well of slightly bitter water, deepened in its natural basin by long-forgotten tribes, and made good travel of it despite the heat.

As they came close to the edge of the great cliffs, glimpsing the plain beneath, set with mesas, dotted here and there with ranches, rolling down to the Rio Grande, Padilla counseled caution. He apparently thoroughly appreciated his precarious situation and had no desire to run further risk for himself by being discovered by his fellow kidnapers in his present company.

The brink of the tableland was etched deep with cañons and ravines, with side-gulches leading from them, that forced them to occasional detours. In some of these, scrub-pines grew, and here and there they could see the gleam of streams hastening down to swell the Rio Grande.

Padilla surveyed his direction narrowly as they rode. Nodding sullenly toward a cleft that cut into the cliffs in the shape of a long U, he announced that they had arrived.

"In cañon you see cave by trail on either side," he said. "Hammond there."

Sandy looked at him keenly, but the Mexican met his glance defiantly.

"All right," said Sandy. "Git down."

He left Mormon and Sam to guard their prisoner in the scant shadow of a pile of granite and crossed on foot to the little cañon, rifle in hand, stepping lightly on the balls of his feet, then, prone on his stomach, wriggling like a snake to the edge.

He paused to carefully remove some loose pebbles, and, resting on his elbows, looked down.

The pocket cañon fell steeply for nearly a thousand feet. Below him a narrow trail showed, winding around the curve of the U, and descending gradually on the other side to the bottom of the ravine. In places the trail was broken by landslides, making any exit difficult, if not impossible.

It was very quiet, the air soundless, save for the shrilling of the *cicadas*. A shadow drifted over the cañon from a buzzard soaring high above him.

Sandy noted where, on his side, the trail joined the rim, not far to his left, and inched closer, searching the track across the cañon for the cave the Mexican had spoken of. Pines and chapparal grew on the less abrupt pitches, throwing shadows that made his task difficult.

He drew back from the edge, planning to shift his position. A little wailing cry floated up to him and he peered down once more.

Up the trail across the cañon toddled a tiny white figure, crying as it ran as fast as it could on uncertain, inadequate, if sturdy, little legs. Out from the tangled shadows of some brush close by, a man darted in pursuit.

"It's li'l son-of-a-gun!" exclaimed Sandy softly, feeling for his rifle.

Before he could give thought to aim, the man roughly grasped the child by the arm, shaking it as he picked it up in his arms, and retraced his steps.

The neigh of a horse sounded, faint but shrilly clear, back of Sandy. The man with the child turned, showing a heavily bearded face, and stared intently at the cliff where Sandy, cursing under his breath, crouched. Then he ran swiftly down the path and disappeared beneath the shadows into the face of the rock.

"It's that —— greaser's hawss," muttered Sandy, looking from the undercurve of a boulder.

He lay prone a moment longer, making out the narrow fissure in which the man had vanished, partly curtained by the tangle of vines and scrub. Then he edged back and rejoined his chums.

"You find?" asked the Mexican, showing his teeth in a mirthless smile. "*Si? Bueno!* Now I go."

"Not yet," replied Sandy shortly. "And keep your mouth shut."

Padilla looked at him furtively, a glint of amused triumph in his glance.

Sandy sat with half-closed eyes smoking a thoughtful cigarette.

"It's Hammond all right," he announced at length to his patiently waiting chums. "I saw him an' the kid. He heard that Pinto nicker—" Sandy looked reproachfully at Mormon and Sam—"an' suspicioned somethin'. But he didn't see me."

"Why didn't you plug him?" asked Sam.

"An' kill the kid? He was packin' him. The li'l son-of-a-gun was tryin' fo' a git-away on his own account."

He finished his cigarette in silence and sat in the shadow of the rocks, scratching his head in the hope of stimulating the thoughts within.

"He might have recognized the neigh of that spavined, loud-mouthed cayuse," he said slowly—"probably did. But he warn't takin' any chances. We've got 'em pocketed. I don't believe you can git down that cañon, the way it looks."

"No, *señor*," broke in Padilla. "You can not. The trail is gone. It is old. Once they thought to find quicksilver there. You say truly, they are in a pocket. So then —you let me go to them. I shall say it is all right. We shall come out, and you shall wait where the trail comes up here. Then——"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Thet sounds reasonable, Sandy," said Mormon. "Ef they started to make any breaks we could round 'em up easy enough. We got 'em covered all the way, ain't we?"

"Sure," said Sam. "Sounds good to me. Why not?"

"It sounds all right," agreed Sandy. "But I shore hate to trust that greaser out of my sight."

The Mexican shrugged his bound shoulders once more.

"The child will want its mother," he suggested. "Maybe it is sick. *Quien sabe?* Only—" his eyelids narrowed—"I must have the money to take with me, or they will not come out."

Sandy shifted on his haunches to face Padilla.

"Sam," he said, "you snake oveh to the edge an' git a bead on that cave. It's right under a couple of screw-pines an' some brush. Pritty hard to make out at first. If two of 'em comes out, git busy. Look out for the kid.

"Now then," he said to Padilla, "you tell me again just what yore scheme is."

The Mexican, forced to accept the steely challenge of Sandy's eyes, spoke hesitatingly.

"It is simple, *señor*. I go to the cave with the money. Everything is *bueno*, *muy bueno*. We leave, as we hav' plan, to take the child to some one, a woman, who will bring it to the ranch tomorrow. Only, you hide, an' when we come—han's up! It is easy, they can not get out of the cave Your *amigo* is there to watch."

Sandy, staring steadily at Padilla saw the pupils of his eyes dilate and contract in swift movement for the fraction of a second as he uttered the last sentence.

"No!" cried Sandy, springing to his feet. "Yo're lyin'. I read it plain in yore eyes. They's a trick somewheres. Git up! Stan' up against the rock!"

He stood in front of the crestfallen Padilla, who tried to maintain his assurance with scant success, and, slipping one of his Colts from its holster, jabbed it into the Mexican's stomach. Padilla shrank against the rock, turning his head to one side.

"You look at me," commanded Sandy, "or this is the end of you. They's only one answer to this. They's a way out of that cave."

The pupils of Padilla's eyes oscillated despite his effort to control them.

"I thought so," said Sandy, while Mormon looked on in astonishment. "An' you wanted we should let you go in there with the money and tell 'em it was *muy bueno?* When a man double-crosses me, hombre," he went on ominously, "he does it once. *Sabe?* Just once."

He thrust his face with its menacing eyes and set jaw close to the Mexican's, upon whose gray forehead the sweat was breaking in cold beads.

"Now then," he snapped, his words sounding like the cracks of a whip, "where's that cave let-out?"

"Don't shoot, *señor*," whined Padilla. "*Por l'amor de Dios*, don't shoot."

"Stan' up on yore laigs," said Sandy. "I ain't goin' to shoot ye if I can use you."

"*Madre de Dios!*" whimpered the Mexican, his knees trembling.

"Talk fast an' talk American!" commanded Sandy, punctuating his sentences with jabs of the pistol. "This triggeh's mighty easy an' I'm gettin' nervous."

"The cave," gasped Padilla, moistening ashen lips, "it open into the next cañon—to the north—beyond this one."

"Is that the only way out?" demanded Sandy.

Padilla nodded southward to the plain and the distant Rio Grande.

"No other way out, *señor*," he said. "Only through the cave to the next cañon, and so to the plain."

"Come on!" cried Sandy. "Git him on his hawss, Mormon. We'll cut 'em off. Tie the greaser's laigs under him. Give him one hand. He's got to ride some."

"Thought you said we couldn't git down thataway," said Mormon, lashing the Mexican's ankles.

Sandy, leading Sam's horse by the bridle, looked at his chum with raised eyebrows.

"We got to," he said.

VI

THEY hit the trail of the first cañon where it led from the rim close to where Sandy had first located the cave and galloped furiously around the loop of the U.

At the mouth of the cave Sandy halted the little cavalcade.

"You stay here, case they double back, Mormon," he ordered. "An' keep that greaser with you. If nothin' breaks inside a couple of hours, take him back to the ranch."

"*Señor*," protested Padilla, "you said that——"

"I played square with you as long as you did with me," said Sandy. "That's all. If they *is* any trouble stahts, Mormon, shoot him first."

"I shore hate to miss all the fun," said Mormon ruefully.

"Some one's got to stay," said Sandy. "Yo're too heavy, Mormon, for the kind of ridin' we've got ahead of us. Come on, Sam."

The two plunged down the almost-effaced trail, Sandy in the lead, on Pete.

The horses snorted as they scrambled across piles of loose débris and rotten granite that went pounding and crashing into the depths of the ravine, leaping across water-worn fissures with treacherous take-off and recover, led here and there by their masters 'round or above great threatening boulders, sliding a-squat on their haunches, clambering, hurrying, galloping at last to the plain and racing, hard-pressed but game, along the cliffs to the entrance of the next cañon from which the kidnapers must emerge, if the Mexican's confession was a true one, which Sandy believed it was.

A creek, still full from the Winter supply, ran close to one wall of the cañon, fringed by willows and pines that climbed the slope. Between the stream and the opposing cliff, cactus blocked any direct passage from the ravine, and there were no signs of a regular trail.

Sandy dismounted. Pete stood, blown, on wide-planted, trembling legs, his flanks heaving.

"Po' li'l hawss," said Sandy, reaching up one hand from where he knelt on the ground, to rub Pete's nose. "Yo're some mile-eater an' cliff-climbeh, Petie.

"Clim' up a ways, Sam," he said, "an' see if you can sight 'em. They haven't come out yet."

He set his ear close to the earth. A dull thudding sounded. Sam came hurrying down the sidehill.

"Two of 'em, ridin' like the devil!" he announced. "One of 'em's got the kid in his arms."

"All right," said Sandy. "We'll handle 'em as they come out. Take that cactus, Sam. I'll take this. Betteh mount."

They took up their places either side of the opening which presented the only outlet from the cañon through the maze of chapparal and cactus. Sandy stood by the side of his horse, taking his lariat from the saddle-strips and uncoiling it.

Pete rubbed his head against his master's chest and Sandy dropped the rope for a moment to scratch him behind the ears with one hand, while the other caressed the soft muzzle.

"Po' li'l hawss!" said Sandy. "Prit' nigh tuckehed out, ain't ye? An' it's a long ways home. I'm jest askin' you fo' one mo' li'l bu'st of speed, Pete. An' when we git back, they's goin' to be pantry-food for you for supper, you ol' Piute, pie-eatin' Pete, you!"

"What you-all doing with the rope, Sandy?" called across Sam in a low voice. "Goin' to stretch it?"

"No," answered Sandy, carefully overhauling the lariat. "When they come out we'll throw down the rifles on 'em. If they don't stop, plug the one without the kid. I'll handle Hammond."

He remounted and sat like a statue on Pete while the drumming of flying hoofs sounded closer and closer. In his head the thoughts were swiftly ranging. Hammond, carrying the child, was safe from gunshot. It was a moot question whether he could run him down on Pete, who was still laboring for breath. And there was always the question of what the desperate man might do to the child if hard put to it.

The safety of the baby demanded quick action, and he prepared to take a chance that only his skill rendered possible, a trick that the cowmen sometimes played on each other in their rough play-time frolics.

Twisting and turning among the cactus thickets came two riders, the foremost hugging a child to his breast with one arm, the second quirting viciously at a laboring horse.

"Halt!" cried the two cowboys simultaneously, leveling their rifles.

With an oath the second man felt for his pistol, setting spurs to his stumbling horse. Sam's Winchester spat and the kidnapper swerved in his saddle, clutching at the horn. A second shot brought the horse crashing to the ground, throwing the rider heavily. Sam dismounted and walked toward him, carrying his rifle at his hip. Sandy fired from the saddle and the reins fell from Hammond's right hand to his horse's neck. The outlaw cursed as the bullet pierced his wrist, dropped his quirt and clasped the child in both arms, urging on the animal with knee and spur and voice.

Sandy hesitated a second, his finger on the trigger, half tempted to fire again, reluctant to adopt his last expedient. Then he flung his rifle into the cactus and started in pursuit, sending out his lariat in widening circles as he rode.

Pete, fired with the chase, responded gallantly, gaining leap by leap in the desperate spurt his master called for, racing directly behind the other horse until both were in exact line. Sandy kept him there until both were free of the cactus. Then his lips tightened and his arm shot out.

The rope coils flew ahead, straightened with the loop, rigid as wire, poised for an eye-wink before it fell, settling inexorably, pinioning Hammond's arms tightly about the child. Sandy snubbed the rope to his horn and Pete stood rigid to the shock as Hammond hurtled from the saddle, dragged squarely over the cantle free of the stirrups landing with a smash upon neck and shoulders on the soft dirt.

There was a cloud of dust into which Sandy, swiftly springing from his saddle, ran, pistol in hand, while Pete maintained the tension of the lariat.

The man lay senseless from the unexpected shock. Sandy hastened to throw off the rope and lift the arms that had involuntarily cushioned the child in safety. He picked up the baby and held it, frightened, whimpering, but unhurt, on his left arm and stood with ready gun surveying Hammond.

"Yore neck wasn't meant to be broken that way," he said, as the man moaned and opened his eyes.

"Here, Sam—" as the latter joined him, the second man, shot through the shoulder, walking sullenly ahead of him—"you handle these two. You'll have to mount 'em on one hawss. Betteh take 'em oveh to the A-bar-A—it's shorter. I'll take care of the kid."

VII

THE sheriff's posse, swelled by the cowboys of the Curly O under the direction of Mormon who had brought in the Mexican to the ranch, rode swiftly through the gathering dusk.

Fast as they sped, ahead of them galloped Barbara and her husband, closely followed by Barton. As they topped a rise they drew rein for an instant to determine their direction.

"Hush," said Barbara, her hand on her husband's arm. "Listen."

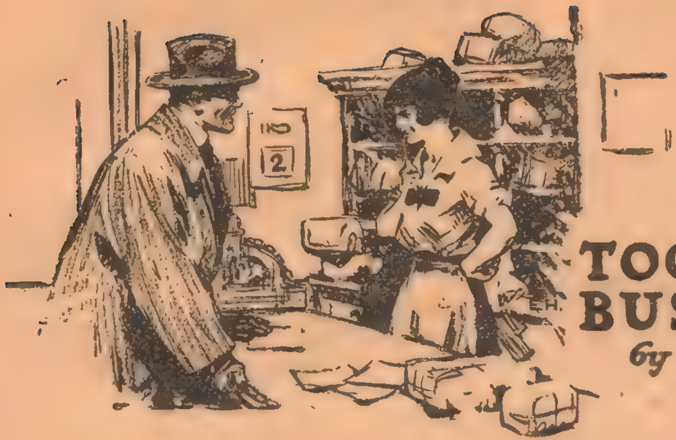
Through the fragrant sage in the twilight, beneath the brightening stars, came a tired horse and its master, who held a little bundle close cuddled in one arm. A deep voice crooned tenderly:

"Said the coyote to the ca'f,
 'Yore motheh was a fr'end of mine,
I loved her like my otheh ha'f
 An' aim to treat ye jes' as fine.' "

"Sandy!" called Barbara Redding, her eager eyes outmatching any of the stars. "Sandy!"

The tired horse pricked up its ears and whinnied.

"Hush up, Pete," said Sandy. "Here he is, Miss Bahba'a. The li'l son-of-a-gun's asleep."



TOO MUCH BUSINESS

by Thomas Addison

Author of "Come-on-Charley," "The Winner," "The Whip Hand," etc.

A GLITTERING sea-green jardinière, filled with toothpicks, standing at the door of a Middle Western hotel dining-room on a Summer's morn would not, one would think, typify a pending wild excitement in the laundry business of that particular city—an upheaval which is talked of there to this day. Yet it was so, and the way of it was this:

It was early on a Tuesday, and Matt Bailey, traveling out of Pittsburg in wholesale crockery and glass, had the dining-room to himself.

He sat brooding over his breakfast with a moody eye on the aforesaid jardinière; for he was in a bitter humor, and the sight of the inoffensive piece of pottery, strangely enough, tended to augment it. As a matter of fact it suggested the cause of his dissatisfaction. This was summed up concretely in a night telegram from Old Pilkins back home.

Old Pilkins was in and of himself "The House." No meddling partners would he tolerate to dispute his sway; his *ipse dixit* settled things; from it there was no appeal. His despatch had brought Matt bouncing out of bed an hour before, and it had soured a promising day for him. He drew it forth now again and scanned it with a curling lip. It was sarcasm boiled to the bone.

MATTHEW BAILEY,
Central House,
Statesburg.
See a doctor for your head. It's the heat.
EZRA PILKINS.

"He ought to see an alienist for his," growled the young man. "It isn't the heat."

Some one spoke at his elbow.

"Coffee bad, or what? You look as if you wouldn't stop at murder."

"Why, hello, Luke Mitchell!" cried Matt in pleased surprise. "When did you get in?"

"Just now. From Terrytown. What's the glad news?"

The newcomer took the chair opposite. His line was starch, and he and Matt were old acquaintances of the road.

"Glad news?" echoed Matt bitterly. "Say, what do you think of a boss like that, Luke?" He shoved the telegram across the table. "I give him a chance to get in on a good thing, and this is what he slips me. Read it!"

Mitchell did so, and grinned.

"Well, why don't you see one?" he quizzed. "It's on the house. This is your voucher."

"Oh, shut up! Don't you get funny, too. Here's the case: The Statesburg Pottery is stuck with sixty-two gross of fourteen-inch special jardinières thrown back on them by the failure of the Chicago Consolidated Stores. Goods all ready to ship, when—bing!—they get word of the receivership. Business the last year has been something rotten in ceramics"— Matt pronounced it with a *k*—"and Wilson let on to me this bust-up has pinched him black and blue. He made me a price on the lot yesterday at cost—forty-five hundred dollars. I offered thirty-seven, and after he'd swallowed hard a couple of times he gave in. I flashed the word to the house and—by Judas—Old Pilkins tells me I'm crazy with the heat!"

Mitchell gave his orders to the waiter before replying. Then he said:

"Did you ever hear the story, Matt, of the man whose larder had run low and he thought he'd try the efficacy of prayer to replenish it?"

"No," said Matt suspiciously. "But go on."

" 'O Lord,' prayed the man, 'I'm shy on grub, so please send me a sack of meal, and a barrel of molasses, and a bucket of lard, and a barrel of flour, and a sack of salt, and a barrel of sugar, and a can of tea, and a barrel of pepper— Oh, Lord, wait! That's too much pepper!' "

As he ended, Mitchell flipped the telegram back across the table and remarked:

"Perhaps Pilkins feels that way. Nine thousand jardinières is some sufficiency if you haven't a market for them."

"But the price, man! We could afford to carry them a while. It's a dollar-and-a-quarter jar over any counter this side the Mississippi—and I had 'em nailed for forty-two cents! See that jar at the door? That's some of Wilson's stuff. It isn't Rookwood, of course, but at the price you can't beat it. The man's an artist; and here I've got to crawfish and tell him I can't make good. I've a mind to wire Pilkins a thing or two, and quit."

Mitchell smiled indulgently. He was married and Matt wasn't. A man thinks before throwing up his job when he is married. He said to Matt:

"You are not hanging anything on Pilkins if you quit. Your stunt is to dope out a scheme to sell those jardinières at a big advance, and do it. Then you'll have the old man where you can talk turkey to him."

"There's a small matter I'll remind you of, mister," retorted Matt ironically. "It's the cash; and my option expires at six tonight."

"That," said Mitchell, beginning an attack on his fruit, "is another reason why you shouldn't quit. Forget it, old chap. You can't have everything your own way. There's that laundry across the street. They don't shut up shop because they can't get all the trade in any one city block. They don't expect it."

"Which is precisely why they don't get it," sneered Matt. "What's to hinder them?" he went on. In his present mood he was ready to dispute the earth's convexity. "It's an open market. If they'd put a real salesman on the job to solicit work instead of a common cart-driver, somebody who could put up a selling talk to the lady of the house——"

"Somebody who could sell her jardinières," mocked Mitchell. "Or——"

"What's that?" exclaimed Matt with a startled look.

"Or," pursued Mitchell, chuckling, "give one away with every bundle——"

He capsized a spoonful of raspberries in transit to his mouth. Matt had brought his fist down with a bang that rattled the dishes.

"By the Great Unwashed, you've done it, Luke!" he squealed.

"Done what?" demanded the other, mystified.

"Given me a hunch that will sell those jars. Say! This is a good big town. Must have a dozen laundries. What?"

"Eight. Two cracker-jacks—the White Star, and Doyle's—and the others, so-so. The White Star is Andrew Shifter's, a big fat, nauseous sort of man I personally detest. Doyle's is the one over the way. He died a couple of years ago, and his widow and daughter Kitty stepped in, and have carried on the business. Believe me, the girl has both eyes open."

Matt frowned thoughtfully at his plate and finished his omelet in silence. Mitchell studied him curiously.

"What's the great idea?" he asked finally.

"How long are you going to be in town?" countered Matt.

"I'm getting out tonight."

Matt took a last swallow of coffee, and rose from the table.

"Luke," he said earnestly, "I haven't time to talk now; but meet me here at noon. Maybe you can help me out a bit—advice. I am going now to shoot a wire into Old Pilkins that will make him turn to a new leaf in his joke-book."

II

AFTER several abortive attempts Matt framed a despatch to Mr. Ezra Pilkins which, he fancied, would wake that old fossil up. It read:

Will guarantee you one hundred per cent. net profit on jars in thirty days. Want leave of absence for that time, and liberty to draw on you up to five thousand dollars. Am neither drunk nor crazy. Rush answer.

Matt sent this off and strode over from the telegraph booth to the desk. He spoke to the clerk in charge:

"Say, Jimmy, give me the name of a lawyer whose rent is pressing him. A young chap who'll think a ten-spot looks as big as a bedquilt."

"Harry Williams. He'll either go to Congress or states prison one of these days," volunteered Jimmy.

Matt made a note of this promising person's address and went out. He crossed the street to the Doyle laundry and entered it. A black-haired, gray-eyed, trim young woman was the only occupant of the office. She was seated at a table behind the counter, checking up wash-tickets. She paused in this task and glanced an inquiry at Matt.

"Good morning," he responded. "Is Mrs. Doyle in?"

"She is out back," said the young woman. "Can I do anything for you? I am Miss Doyle."

"Oh!" Matt smiled on her approvingly. "My name is Bailey. Glad to meet you, Miss Doyle. Perhaps you will answer my question: if I bring you in some business—quite a good deal—what commission would you pay?"

Miss Doyle got up and approached the counter. She returned Matt's smile faintly; for he was a presentable young fellow, upstanding and of a well-balanced self-assurance that claimed attention.

"How much business?" she asked. "Ten dollars' worth?"

Matt made a reproachful gesture.

"Do I look as cheap as that? Say a hundred dollars—more perhaps! You don't care how much it is, do you?"

Miss Kitty Doyle surveyed him carefully, and with a small frown gathering between her eyes. It became her, Matt thought, this studious pose. She was, he perceived, a very pretty girl.

"Do you mean a week, a month, or what?" she demanded.

"A hundred dollars a day — perhaps more," Matt answered. He seemed to insist on the proviso. "And every day for ten weeks," he added.

Miss Doyle showed him a straight and shapely back as she returned to the table.

"You can take your joking somewhere else," she remarked icily. "We are busy here."

"I was never quite so much in earnest in my life," Matt assured her, tapping the counter with his finger for emphasis. "I have discovered a way to get more business for laundries; but I must know what commission I can count on before putting my plan in operation. That's fair, isn't it?"

"You will have to see Mrs. Doyle," the girl flung at him without looking up.

"That was my desire in the first place," he reminded her. "But I am sure you can answer if you will. It won't commit you to anything, you know—not until I sign you up."

She raised her head and fixed him with a mocking eye; and she said, making her utterance laboredly distinct:

"If it will get me rid of you—fifteen per cent., when, as you say, we 'sign up' with you. Until then——"

She turned to her work. Matt held the silence till it wore on her. She looked at him again, plainly disturbed. Then he spoke:

"You are much too young, I fear, to appreciate what I have to offer. I will call when your mama is at leisure."

He bowed with a fatherly air that left her peony pink, and took himself off. So, a hundred dollars a day was a proposition that set them going! Great Scott, what would they say to a thousand a day? Have him locked up, probably, and tried for lunacy.

He came to a tiny park in the embrace of three streets. He sat down beneath a patriarchal elm and held counsel with himself. Was he on the wrong track, or was the plan, actively shaping in his mind—taking on new angles every minute—practical of application?

He lit a cigar, pulled out pencil and paper, and lost sight of his whereabouts in a maze of figures. At the end of half an hour he rose with a satisfied sigh. The problem had worked out right, all except the commission. They would have to give up more than fifteen per cent. Miss Kitty Doyle was too frugally inclined.

MATT stepped into a bank and was granted leave to consult a Bradstreet's, after which he found his way to the White Star Laundry, Mr. Andrew Shifter, proprietor. Mr. Shifter was immured in his private office, but Matt, with the plea of urgency, pushed into it.

The gentleman sat in his shirt-sleeves and the draft of an oscillating fan, yet his fat and flaccid front was bedewed with a sweat that seemed to rise up ceaselessly from the well-springs of his being. Matt went at him without waste of introductory words.

"My name is Matthew Bailey. I am seeking information. What is the average laundry bundle sent in here — I mean its charge value to you?"

Mr. Shifter mopped his brow and glowered at him.

"About forty cents," he said crossly. "Why?"

"I've a plan to increase your business. If I do it, what commission do I get?"

Mr. Shifter's expression changed; it betrayed a degree of interest.

"How much business?" he inquired.

"A hundred dollars a day — perhaps more."

Mr. Shifter's expression underwent another change—it was suspicion now. In a casual way he extended a cushiony white hand, on which a diamond sparkled, to a convenient paper-weight.

"A day, did you say?" he questioned softly.

Matt repressed a smile. He read the obese person's thought.

"Yes. You've got no real grip on your customers; nothing binding. It's a habit, largely, that keeps them coming to you. The other fellow can get them away, if he tries hard enough. What you want is to hold them. My plan will do it, and boost your business; a hundred dollars a day for ten weeks anyway. After that we can talk some more. What's the answer?"

"Ten weeks — six thousand dollars," purred Mr. Shifter, his eye on the ceiling, his hand on the weight. "That sounds good."

"Perhaps more," stipulated Matt.

"Oh, sure!" agreed Mr. Shifter soothingly. "I understand. You have a plan. Come in tomorrow, and we'll talk it over. It may cool off by then—the weather," he supplemented hastily, for fear the madman might misconstrue him.

"I shall be busy tomorrow," demurred Matt. "All I want to know today is the commission you are prepared to pay. How about twenty-five per cent.?"

"Sure! On a hundred dollars a day? You bet!" Mr. Shifter's assent was hearty to enthusiasm. A quick idea occurred to Matt.

"It will oblige me if you will put it in writing," he requested. "It doesn't commit you in any way until I turn in the business."

"Why not wait until you—until everything is ready?" suggested Mr. Shifter cajolingly. "In the meantime you have my word."

"It won't do." Matt's tone was determined. "I must have something to show. It's part of my plan; and it won't take a minute."

Matt, who had not been invited to a seat, had drawn nearer to the laundryman as he spoke. The latter, reading in his visitor's earnest mien a menace to his rightful length of years, threw hesitation to the winds. He abandoned the paper-weight as an inadequate protection, drew a sheet of the laundry's stationery to him, dipped his pen in ink, and said with a bright cheerfulness:

"If it's part of your plan—of course! Go ahead; tell me how you want it put."

"Say this," prompted Matt: "'I, Andrew Shifter, for and in behalf of the White Star Laundry, hereby agree to pay Matthew Bailey a cash commission of twenty-five per cent., payable in full on demand, on all laundry-work orders to the value of not less than one hundred dollars a day that he or his agents may turn in to me during the period of ten consecutive weeks from date of delivery of the first one hundred dollars' worth. The work when done to be charged out at my present published price-list.'"

Mr. Shifter scrawled this off in a shaky hand, but with an alacrity begotten of the assurance that the veriest child could see the preposterous agreement bound him to nothing at all. A hundred dollars a day for ten weeks running? With seven other laundries scouting for work? It couldn't be done!

He signed the paper with a courageous flourish and proffered it to Matt.

"There you are," he said briskly. "That ought to do you, eh?"

A man was passing the door. Matt stepped to it and accosted him.

"Get somebody and come in here," he ordered. "Mr. Shifter wants you to witness a paper."

"Eh? I say! What?" ejaculated the fat

man at the desk, dabbing at his face with his handkerchief.

Matt returned to him. He dropped his hand in his pocket, quite without design, but to Mr. Shifter it seemed an ominous act. There might be something in there highly prejudicial to his anatomical entirety. He laughed affably, a heroic effort, and answered his own query.

"Oh, yes, to be sure! Make it shipshape. Quite right. I was thinking the same thing."

Matt changed to a place behind him when the men came in, and Mr. Shifter, feeling that his life hung upon the merest thread should he make a move awry, bade them witness his signature, and even went so far as to explain to them the nature of the agreement. He considered this a clever bit of strategy that would ingratiate him with the murderous crank at his elbow.

"Come to study it," remarked Matt, when they were alone again, "this writing is all that is necessary between us. It seems to cover the case completely. Doesn't it?"

"It does," concurred Mr. Shifter readily.

"All I have to do now is to get busy and make good."

"That's all," encouraged Mr. Shifter. "Send in the work and we'll do the rest."

"Better spread out a little and take on more help," counseled Matt, preparing to leave. "I'm giving you fair warning."

"Sure! I'll attend to it right off," promised Mr. Shifter. "Er—ah—good morning, Mr. Bailey!"

As Matt disappeared through the door the laundryman slumped down in his chair, oozing relief at every pore. Yet, as he grew composed and allowed his mind to dwell upon the details of the interview, he found himself becoming doubtful of his fears. On what grounds, after all, were they based?

The man's manner, as he thought on it, was not threatening; it was simply assured. He had come to his point at once, and his speech was coherent. Ha! It was the extravagance of his claims—that plan of his, whatever it might be—that betrayed his derangement. Why, if what he proposed were possible, the White Star would have the wash work of the city cornered! He'd have to build a bigger plant. It would swamp him as things stood. Eh? What? Suppose——

But Mr. Shifter's imagination lacked room to entertain such fanciful conceits. It was stuffed with sordid, solid facts pertaining to the price of caustic soda, oxalic acid, chlorid of lime, and those more secret chemicals that make the life of one's collars and cuffs but as a fleeting dream.

III

MATT, when he left the laundry, sought a telephone booth and called up the Statesburg Pottery. He requested them to rush to him at his hotel, by special messenger, a sample jardinière from the lot his option covered.

Next he hunted up Mr. Harry Williams, the lawyer, and was closeted with him for an hour. After this he paid a visit to the city hall, and had a chat with the official in charge of the bureau of statistics.

Coming back he stopped at a furniture store on the main retail business street and talked with the manager. And, finally, he called at the accounting-rooms of the daily papers and got their advertising-display rates.

On his return to the Central House, Matt found a telegram from Pilkins. As he read it his face took on a puzzled look, then flushed angrily. Pilkins had sent him an ultimatum. It ran:

> You must be both. Make your route or send your time in.

Matt crumpled the yellow sheet in his hand.

"Both drunk and crazy, am I?" he muttered. "The old owl!"

He sat down, sizzling, and tried to reduce to words the telegraph company would accept, his complete and ultimate opinion of the little wizened, gray-whiskered man two hundred miles away. Here he had an opening to pull off something that would make good money for them both, and the old pinch-penny—worth half a million, easily—wouldn't loosen up for a beggarly few thousands.

It was enough to make a saint sass his grandmother. By George, if he could put this thing across by himself! He had eight hundred dollars banked. It was only a drop in the bucket. But if he could get the pottery to take a chance!

Matt, with this new inspiration hot upon him, forgot Old Pilkins for the time and set his thoughts at work in another channel.

Presently he went up to his room, leaving word at the desk for Mitchell, and fell to figuring costs in systematic detail.

He had finished, and was reviewing his computations, when the messenger from the pottery entered with the jardinière. Mitchell was at his heels.

"Well, how is the merry war progressing?" he questioned when the boy had gone.

Matt tossed him Pilkins's wire and began stripping the wrapping from the jardinière.

"Look at it, Luke!" he begged. "Isn't it a beauty? They are bound to fall for it. I can't lose!"

"If you don't mind," said Mitchell patiently, "I'd like the English of that. You are talking Dutch to me. And what about this telegram? It seems to put a crimp in your activities in this neck of the woods. You've got to move on."

"Oh, I don't know. Sit down. Shove this cigar in your mouth and listen. If you see a hole anywhere in my logic stick a finger through and wiggle it. First run your eye over this—Exhibit A."

Matt handed Mitchell his contract with Andrew Shifter. Mitchell read it carefully and passed it back. He was interested, but refrained from comment.

"Exhibit B—this prize pot," continued Matt. "Any one who will contract to give ten dollars' worth of work within ten weeks to the White Star Laundry will get a jardinière free of cost. They'll be mostly women, and they'll fall for the jar like father for the prodigal son. It's the way with 'em with pottery; they can't help it."

"Go on," said Mitchell.

"You see," complied Matt, "they can give out the work to suit themselves—the whole ten dollars' worth at once, a dollar's worth a week, or any old way. The average laundry bundle, Shifter says, is worth forty cents to him; but he was thinking only of collars and shirts. He forgot the family wash, the flat-rate stuff. A dollar a week is not excessive for a family. And the statistics show there are thirty-eight thousand families in this city. Are you beginning to get me, Luke?"

Mitchell nodded.

"Go on," he urged.

"Exhibit C—customer's order, to be signed in duplicate. Drawn by a lawyer. Short and simple, but water-tight. Say only half the number of registered families are eligible for my purpose; and, to be safe, cut that in two. What have you got? Ninety-five hundred families at ten dollars each is how much? What?"

Matt came to an exultant pause. He leaned back with his thumbs in his vest and surveyed his companion with a conqueror's air. Mitchell smiled.

"Great!" he applauded. "You are pushing our good friend Colonel Mulberry Sellers hard. It's pretty near as cute as his eye-water scheme."

Matt waved this aside with a scornful gesture.

"Do you think," he demanded, "I'm going off half-cocked on this? Listen! I have parceled out this town into ten districts, and I shall advertise for ten high-grade specialty salesmen to work it—men who can talk the birds off the trees.

"Each man will take along a sample jar in a baize bag, and he'll turn me in fifteen orders a day if he has to work from six A. M. to midnight. Why? Because I'm going to pay him six dollars a day cash wages, and a bonus of a twenty-five-dollar suit of clothes if he sticks to the finish. I guess that won't bring me business-getters. Oh, no!"

"Go on," said Mitchell, for the third time.

"Do a little figuring in your head, Luke; it won't wreck the works," Matt resumed. "Ten men—one hundred and fifty orders—fifteen hundred dollars a day—nine thousand dollars a week — my gross profits, twenty-two hundred and fifty a week. And I'm betting two weeks will see a clean-up. Don't make me laugh."

"Two weeks? Why, your contract calls for ten. What's the catch?" Mitchell was sitting up stiffly erect, his eyes intent.

"I'll come to that," Matt answered.

He had a sense of the dramatic, and there was in Mitchell's attitude an earnestness which inspired him. If he could sweep him off his feet Mitchell might——

"Let's have a look at the costs," he said abruptly. "The jars will stand me in forty-two cents a piece. Fifteen jars per day per man, plus wages, is twelve dollars and thirty cents; ten men one week, seven hundred and thirty-eight dollars; my net profit per week, fifteen hundred and twelve beauteous bucks. Bad, ain't it?"

"But the jar deliveries to customers? That will take time and money." Mitchell put the question anxiously.

"Simple as sanding sugar," asserted Matt. "There won't be any deliveries, my boy. It's too crudely expensive. The jars are in eight different designs, and the ladies, bless 'em, will want to pick and choose for themselves. All right. They'll be given an order on the Paulett Furniture Company, and can call any time and get the goods. Paulett's will handle the pots for me at a nickel a piece; and they'll give me a week's exhibition display in their show-windows for a hundred dollars. Newspapers advertising the display—I'm going to splurge on this—four hundred dollars. Commission on, say to start with, a thousand jars, fifty dollars. Incidentals — printing, bags for jars, and so on—another fifty. Total general expense for the first week——"

"Six hundred dollars," announced Mitchell. He had drawn up to the table and jotted down the items as Matt reeled them off. "Net profit on the week, nine hundred and twelve dollars."

"And fifteen hundred from then on," crowed Matt jubilantly. "It's horrible! Heh?"

Mitchell was staring at the figures before him.

"If you can only do it," he mused.

"Do what?"

"Get the orders."

"Is that all? Pooh! Come along with me. Pick out any middle-class residence you wish, and time me. It's a cinch, I tell you."

MATT caught up the jar as it stood, without wrappings. It was an armful, but he didn't mind. He led the way to the street. Mitchell followed. Both were salesmen; both knew the game—its risks, fascinations and rewards. Gambling is dull monotony beside it. There is no other game just like it. In forty minutes they were back. Matt had his contract, and a Mrs. Adkins had the jar. Matt stopped at the telegraph booth.

"Here," he proclaimed modestly, "is where Old Pilkins loses the best man on his staff. Help me to break the news to him; something that will bring on apoplexy."

"Wait a minute," cautioned Mitchell. "The jars—how are you going to get them?"

"Talk 'em out of Wilson if I can; steal 'em if I must. But I'm going to get 'em."

"But, your first week's selling costs? You'll need a thousand for that—more!"

"I've eight hundred I can lay my hands on. I may have to let Wilson in with me, but I'll get by in some way or bust. It's too good a thing to pass up. And, Luke, I'm surprised at you. You seem to have overlooked the milk in this little coconut I'm going to crack. It's the catch you asked about. Do you know what it will do to Shifter if I turn in nine thousand dollars' worth of orders a week? Bury him out of sight, that's all!"

Matt threw back his head and laughed. He could see the jelly-like laundryman's despairing face.

"I'm wise!" exclaimed Mitchell. "Shifter will have to settle or stand a damage suit."

"And he's good and able to settle, you bet!" Matt declared. "Rated at sixty thousand. My lawyer says he's worth twice that—made it in the Street—but it's under cover. Income tax. Savvy?"

Mitchell spoke earnestly.

"Look here, Matt. I'm slow, but am I too late to nose in on this? I can manage a thousand if it will help——"

Matt made a grab for his hand.

"Help? It will do the trick! I wasn't going to ask you, Luke, but I was hoping for this. It's fifty-fifty with us. And say, can't you give me a lift with this job—take a week or two off?"

"Not now; later, maybe. I'm positively due in Wheeling, Thursday; and Pittsburg, Friday—Pittsburg! By Jove, I'll drop in on your house and give them an earful of chatter about this. They'll have to call a doctor for your boss."

"They'll have to do it now," Matt stated grimly. "I'm going to electrocute him."

He hunched himself over a pad of blanks.

"Don't!" interposed Mitchell. "Be dignified—sorrowful. That's the way to do it. Pilkins will begin to think he's missed his cue, and when I get through with him on Friday, he'll be sure of it. Ten to one you hear from him again."

And this is what the little man back home found waiting for him when he came in from his meager lunch; Matt had copied it from a book of practical quotations Jimmy, the clerk, rustled up for him:

> "And must we part? Well, if we must, we must, and the less said the better." So long!

This message was marked "Collect." The charge was warranted; Pilkins had asked for his time.

IV

MATT placed his advertisement for salesmen in all the papers. He spent money on this ad, for he wanted it seen. It was a four-inch double-column display, and it was framed to scare off idlers, drunks, and used-to-be's. The men who answered that ad would assuredly have to qualify. They were asked to call at noon the next day at the Central House.

Then Matt took a car out to the pottery, on the edge of the city. Possibly he should have reversed his order of action; but failure did not enter into his scheme of things.

Wilson, the manager of the pottery, was a keen-eyed, wrinkle-worried man of forty odd. He wheeled around in his chair when Matt walked in, with a quick, searching glance at his face. What he saw there—what Matt took care to show there—did not seem to enliven him. Matt sat down with a dispirited air.

"Well," he announced, "you are stuck with those jars, Mr. Wilson. The boss laughed at me. Here's a wire from him."

He handed the manager Ezra Pilkins's first telegram. Wilson read it and passed it back.

"The old man has sand in his gear-box," he observed caustically. "Nothing like this will come his way again in a hundred years. What did you want that sample jar in such a hurry for?"

"To show a chap from New York. Thought I might interest him; but spot cash? He fainted. If you'd make terms now——"

"At forty-five hundred?"

"Thirty-seven."

"Nothing doing," snapped Wilson.

Matt reached for his hat.

"Oh, all right," he said nonchalantly. "I've a plan for selling those pots that ought to work out, but I'm not sure. I'd have to handle the deal with my own money, and it isn't much. I'd have to—oh, what's the use! I vacate the option. Good luck to you!"

He rose, but Wilson held up a meditative hand.

"What's the plan?" he desired to know.

Matt grinned.

"It came to me in a dream. It's bad luck to tell. But here! I'll make you a proposition. Take it or leave it. Seven hundred cash down, and six notes, ten days apart, for five hundred each."

"What security?"

"The jars; stock to be drawn on only as the notes are met; seventeen hundred today to satisfy the first payment. Delivery free in Statesburg."

Wilson gave a cynical laugh.

"You are too modest," he deplored.

"It's my one failing," confessed Matt. "Good morning. I see you'd rather nurse those jars till they're nice and crazed."

His hand was on the knob when Wilson, with an ireful exclamation, as if an unexpected pin had prodded him, called out:

"You infernal, depraved, cold-blooded, sand-bagging yeggman! They'll land you in the chair yet. Come back here and write your check. I'm in a hole, and you know it."

"GIVE the office to Old Pilkins," said Matt to Luke Mitchell that evening as he saw him off. "Tell him I'll have a few jars in stock if he happens to get a call for some. Six months ago there was a Spanish chap down in Rio who queried us on thirty gross of fourteen-inch, but he went to sleep, and I reckon O. P. has forgotten him. He may wake up and do something. Anyway, we'll have jars to sell if Shifter takes the count when I expect him to."

"Leave it to me," responded Mitchell. "What worries me is the shoe-string you are working with. If there's a slip-up anywhere——"

"There won't be. All I want is the right selling crew, and the rest is pie. We'll start in Thursday. I'll wire you that night the first day's results. If it reads merrily you might by accident drop the telegram where Pilkins will find it. I want to rub it in on him, the old clam!"

Matt, after Mitchell was gone, had himself taken up to his room, and here he studied out a line of selling talk for his men, to be typed in manifold. Then he touched a match to an old jimmy pipe and wreathed himself in smoke; and in it, as in a double exposure moving-picture scene, he saw a trim, gray-eyed, black-haired young woman frowning at him scornfully. There was not a doubt of it—she was a decidedly pretty girl!

"I'll give her a chance," he said, when after a time he got up and made ready for bed.

In the morning he stepped over to the laundry. Miss Kitty merely glanced at him as he came in, and said:

"Mrs. Doyle is at home, ill."

Matt politely expressed his regrets, and added:

"It is unfortunate, because I've a notion she would listen to me. I've signed up with the White Star. It will take away a bunch of business from you, and all the others; but I've been thinking it over, and I haven't the heart to push you—that is, your mother—to the wall. There's a way out, if you'd care to have me tell you."

Miss Doyle came over to the counter and rested her arms on it. Apparently her mood had changed, for she smiled at him pleasantly.

"Just what is this joke of yours?" she challenged. "It is awfully hot to be going around stringing people for the fun of it. It must be something new. What is it?"

Matt's brown eyes smiled into the gray ones—a friendly smile that deepened hers.

"Thank you," he said fervidly. "I was beginning to think January had left an icicle here in Statesburg that July couldn't melt. Please don't freeze up again when I tell you that though it's something new it is not a joke at all—" she stiffened instantly—"unless you consider this a joke."

He spread before her the Shifter contract. She allowed her eyes to rest upon it, raised them distrustfully to his, then, at his urging, lowered them again and read down the lines.

"It was you," laughed Matt, "who were having your little joke with me, Miss Doyle! Fifteen per cent.? You didn't mean it, of course. Twenty is common, and twenty-five not unusual, I'm told."

She acknowledged this with an absent nod. Her brows were drawn in perplexed consideration of the contract.

"Six hundred dollars a week?" Why, how——"

She stopped, appealing to him for the solution.

Matt explained. He could do it now, for he was safeguarded at all points. The girl listened, doubtfully at first; hurled questions at him next; and, at last, settled to a consuming interest which held her dumb.

"As I understand it from my attorney, who seems to be a rather well-posted man," Matt concluded, "the White Star isn't a popular institution with you other laundry people. That cut-rate war wasn't a thing any of you enjoyed too much, I imagine; Shifter isn't the sort of person you'd lose an arm for. Well, here's your chance to even up. Let me show you."

Whereupon Matt, who was by now behind the counter in agreeable contiguity to the girl, carefully sketched for her the plan that had occurred to him over his pipe the night before. It was a new angle to his proposed campaign, yet in no way interfered with the main issue—it helped. And there were possibilities in it of further profit to Messrs. Bailey and Mitchell not unpleasant to contemplate.

When he came out, an hour later, Miss Kitty companioned him to the door. She gave him a cordial hand at parting, and a brilliant smile that followed him across the way, for he turned to see. She was a wonderfully pretty girl!

V

THERE are times in a man's life when all things conspire to balk him, from the elusive collar-button in the morning to the just-missed five-o'clock for home at night. And there are other times, rare indeed as rain when needed, in which his every undertaking flows as smoothly to success as rivers of oil over beds of glass. This latter luck was Matt's in his present undertaking.

He started in with a larger crew of salesmen than he had intended doing; for his ads had drawn to him men of ability not only from the city but from neighboring towns. He had half a hundred to pick from, and at the end of an afternoon of gruelling catechism he found himself with twelve who had qualified, and three others worth serious consideration.

He subdivided his districts to make territory for additional men, and in the morning he sent his expeditionary force of twelve hot-foot into the fray. That they fought valiantly was evinced by the telegram Luke Mitchell received in Pittsburg the following day, and which Old Pilkins picked up, later, from his office floor:

> First round. Twelve men knocked out an average of nine orders each. Total, one thousand and eighty dollars. Watch it grow.

On Friday the total number of sales

reached fifteen hundred dollars, an average of twelve and a half orders per man. Saturday saw sales drop to twelve hundred and sixty dollars, and Matt cautioned his squad that henceforth fifteen orders a day was the minimum; if in any two days the average for a man fell below this mark he would be let out.

Secretly, Matt was in high feather over the results; the start surpassed his expectations. He paid off for the half week, and it made a big hole in his bank balance. However, nine hundred and sixty dollars in commissions was coming to him—if he could get it. And he decided to try out on Monday the three men in reserve. A day would prove them, or two at most.

At ten o'clock on Monday morning Matt walked into Mr. Shifter's office. Mr. Harry Williams, the attorney, was with him. Mr. Shifter was bent over his desk absorbed in the perusal of a collection of report-slips. They were, apparently, of a distressful nature, for he was saying things to himself which are never heard in church. He swung around with a jerk when his name was spoken.

"What the devil——"

His voice died in his throat. Matt was silently extending to him a packet of papers neatly girdled with rubber-bands.

"Work-orders," he stated briefly. "Three hundred and eighty-four of them. At ten dollars each."

Mr. Shifter ignored the packet, yet he was aware now that he could not ignore the man. He had reason to know the fellow was very actively sane. He found his voice.

"Do you think," he blustered, "you can put anything on me like this? I've got reports from my drivers. You are simply handing me work that's already mine—my own customers!"

"In the first place," rejoined Matt calmly, "only about thirty per cent. of these orders are from persons you are serving. We asked as we went along. In the second place, you had no hold on them; they were anybody's to get who went after them. I've proved it. In the third place, our contract doesn't specify from whom I was to get the work. Here's a copy of it. Have a look!"

He tossed contract and orders on the desk, and helped himself to a chair. Mr. Williams laid a third paper on the desk.

"Kindly receipt for the orders," he requested politely, and helped himself, also, to a chair. "If you refuse the work," he said further, "it will put the White Star in bad with the people of this city. Do you want that?"

Mr. Shifter regarded Mr. Williams with plain dislike. That gentleman had instituted court proceedings against him, on a time not distant, for an unreasonable customer whose claim, for laundry lost, Mr. Shifter had disputed. And Mr. Shifter had paid, with costs. He said now:

"The contract was gotten from me under—" he was about to use the word compulsion, but his pride forbade—"under a misapprehension," he finished.

Matt turned to the lawyer.

"Suppose you step out and interview the witnesses. Mr. Shifter acquainted them with the provisions of the contract. He seemed then to consider it a very good thing."

"And why not?" asked the lawyer of the laundryman. "You have there nearly four thousand dollars' worth of work covenanted for. You ought to be tickled to death, Shifter!"

"And it's only a beginning," said Matt with an air of apology. "Just breaking the ground. This week we shall get to going right. You see," he explained to Mr. Shifter, as if his attitude encouraged him, "those ads in the Sunday papers stirred the women up. They are packing Paulett's store this morning—daffy over the jardinières. Want to carry them off on the spot. I've had to put a man there to take orders. Great scheme, isn't it?"

He leaned forward, like one sure of merited applause. Mr. Shifter mopped his face and breathed stertorously. At length he managed a sneer, and inquired:

"Who guarantees these orders? How do I know they are straight?"

"There's your telephone," suggested Matt. "Pick out any names you wish and ask."

"As for the guarantee," put in Williams, "read the order, Shifter. It's a contract. I drew it. And in this state a *feme covert*—that's a married woman—can contract of her own part in any sum under one hundred dollars, if it's that you are driving at. With others, of due age, the sky's the limit," he added, descending gracefully to vernacular. "What's the trouble, Shifter? You're in a fair way to get all the laundry-work in town."

Mr. Shifter gave him a baleful glance. He caught up the bunch of orders, read one and riffled the rest with a stodgy thumb. In the silence the drone of the electric fan filled the room. Then suddenly, without the preface of "hem" or "hum," Mr. Shifter exploded into speech:

"What do you take me for, you two? Do you think I don't see the kick in this corner you're forcing on me? All the work in the city? I can't handle it. You know it. It's a conspiracy to ruin me!"

Matt interrogated his attorney with an injured air.

"How? By increasing his business, according to contract?"

"I repudiate the contract!" bawled the baited laundryman. "It's robbery!"

"Robbery?" Matt's face was a picture of bewilderment. "Mr. Williams, this is beyond me. I bring him in thousands of dollars of work, and he says I am robbing him."

"Come now, Shifter," soothed the attorney. "Be reasonable. Of course you don't mean what you said. It's libelous. Sign the receipt and let Mr. Bailey go. He's a busy man."

Mr. Shifter, weltering in the sweat of his very bones, screamed a reply.

"I'll see you both in Hades first! I'll send my lawyers to you. I'll fight. You can't bulldoze me, Williams. I know you!"

"It appears you don't," remarked Williams, getting to his feet. He reached forth and took the pack of orders from the other's hand. "Mr. Bailey will go on with his contract. Meanwhile consult your counsel. I'll be delighted to hear what they have to say."

He set out for the door, Matt following.

It is said that before the eyes of a drowning man the events of his life hurtle by at lightning speed; and so, in the suffocating moment that ensued for Mr. Shifter as the two minatory figures crossed the few breadths of Brussels between desk and door, he saw the folly of his course. These men were to be placated, not opposed.

"Hold on!" he gasped. "What will you settle for?"

Williams stayed his steps on the threshold. Matt returned a step.

"What do you mean?" he questioned. "My commission on these present orders is nine hundred and sixty dollars, payable on demand. And I won't cut it. What do you mean?"

"I don't ask you to cut it," Mr. Shifter hastened to assure him. His voice was oily now. "I'll pay it, do the work, and give you five hundred dollars bonus to call the deal off. That's liberal, ain't it—square?"

Matt gazed upon him compassionately.

"My dear man! Do you know what you're asking! I estimate my contract to be worth to me easily twenty thousand dollars. Really now, you mustn't say these things. It's nonsense."

Mr. Shifter's mind, dodging this way and that for an avenue of escape from his frightful predicament, came suddenly upon it. He would farm the business out among the other laundries! They'd be glad to get back the work the infernal mechanism this man had set in motion would snatch away from them. He brightened, and said with artful dissimulation:

"It can't last, Bailey. You'll fall down in a day or two. So go ahead; I'll do the work. Give me the orders."

"The receipt," prompted Williams from the door.

Mr. Shifter signed it, and stood definitely committed to his contract.

"Now," said Matt, "my commission, please. After this we will make the settlements weekly, if you wish."

"Without prejudice to your right of demand," prompted the lawyer again."

"Certainly; I reserve the right," stipulated Matt.

Mr. Shifter yielded. The orders unquestionably were valid. Williams would not dare to be a party to an open fraud; and the reports of his own men were convincing. Matt went away, able now to finance his project for another week.

It was not until minutes later, so sadly muddled were his wits, that it dawned on Mr. Shifter he had paid commissions on work that would come in only in piecemeal, scattered over ten long weeks. At this rate he would be spending thousands of dollars in commissions months in advance of equal receipts.

He put on his hat and tottered out into the street. He would see his lawyers; but first his condition required a drink.

VI

"WELL, I've started my vacation," said Luke Mitchell as, a fortnight later, on a Monday afternoon, he swung off the train and grasped Matt's hand. He laughed. "How's the melon—ready to cut?"

"Just about," grinned Matt. "Hop in this cab, and I'll take you somewhere."

On the way Matt submitted to him certain figures, neatly marshalled on a sheet of foolscap. An expression of intense satisfaction settled on Mitchell's face as he looked them over. This is what he saw:

RECEIPTS		
Work-orders: total value to date	$29,100.00	
Commissions due and paid		$7,275.00
EXPENSE		
Pottery paid in full......	$3700.00	
Wages, 12 men, A class, 15 days @ $6.00	1080.00	
Wages, 12 men, B class, 12 days @ $4.50	648.00	
Advtg., printing, show-windows, sundries ...	650.00	
Com. to Paulett on 2900 jars	145.00	
Retainer to Williams ...	100.00	6,323.00
		952.00
Joint capital intact		1,800.00
Cash in bank		$3,243.00

"Why, we can't lose!" exclaimed Mitchell delightedly.

"Wilson is a good fellow, and I paid him up," explained Matt. "If it hadn't been for him——"

"Sure! What about Shifter? He must be doing a dance?"

"I haven't seen him for a week. Kept out of his way. He was 'phoning me all day yesterday. Williams has been handling him."

"Didn't he fight?"

"He tried. Wanted to raise his price-list and scare people off; but I forestalled that in the contract. His lawyers told him he hadn't a leg to stand on. The case is unique; no precedents in the books. He's like a man with a bear by the tail—he can't let go."

Mitchell laughed.

"Not until you say the word. Hello, here's the Central House! I thought——"

"We are not going in now," Matt informed him. "We are going to see Kitty."

"'Kitty?' Oh, Kitty Doyle! Say, old chap, you must be thick with her?" said Mitchell slyly, as he tumbled out of the cab.

"Thick as thieves," rejoined Matt. "The old lady is laid up with inflammatory rheumatism. Kitty is running the shop. Come on in."

They seemed to be as busy as usual in the laundry. Drivers were bringing in bundles, and there were sounds from the back of a general activity. Mitchell stared. He had imagined, with the White Star cornering the work, business would be at the point of death with the other plants. But Kitty, smiling and chipper, was greeting him. Doyle's used his starch.

"Come around," Matt invited.

He opened the gate and led the way behind the counter with the assurance of a habit. He went further. There was a small glass-partitioned room off the main office, and Matt marched into this.

"Now, Kitty," he said, when they were seated, "tell him what it means—the speed you've got on here. You can see he's foggy as a night on the lake."

Kitty showed a faultless row of white teeth, and her gray eyes danced.

"Why," she said, "the White Star tried to farm out the work; but I went around to see the others, and we wouldn't touch it. Matt put me up to that. Shifter was wild. He saw damage suits in his dreams, I guess. He offered to pro rate the business among us, according to capacity, and let us deliver and collect in full. The East End—only a one body-ironer shop—gave in, but the rest of us held out. Finally, Shifter proposed to pay five per cent. on the book value of the work, and still let us collect in full. We stood out for ten—and got it!" she concluded triumphantly.

"That was ten days ago," Matt acquainted Mitchell. "Counting the commission, the plants are showing very nearly normal profits, and yet the White Star is working overtime at a big loss. Luke, it's the funniest thing that ever happened!"

"It's the best thing!" declared Kitty vehemently. "Shifter has tried to hog the laundry business of this town, and——"

Mitchell burst into a guffaw. He couldn't help it.

"That's good! First rate!" he applauded.

"I didn't mean it that way," she said, though with a smile. "He's tried to steal business from us—played dirty tricks on us all—and now he's getting his. It has almost cured mother, just thinking of it."

Matt chanced to glance out of the window. What he saw brought a long, low whistle from him.

"See who's here!" he exclaimed.

"Shifter!" cried Kitty. "What does he want?"

"I can guess," chuckled Matt. "Would you mind, Kitty, letting us have the room a while?"

"Of course. I'll send him to you."

She ran out. They could hear her curtly answering Shifter's questions; then he came lumbering in. His face was set in anxious lines, and it was pale. To Matt he looked as if he had lost a score of pounds.

"I'VE been trying to get you for two days," said Mr. Shifter, pointing an accusing finger at him.

"Really?" Matt's surprise was elaborate. "Have a chair. This is my partner—Mr. Mitchell. You know him, I believe. He's in starch."

"Your partner?" Mr. Shifter gave Mitchell a prolonged scowl. Mitchell returned the scrutiny with the last insult a man can give under fire of the kind. He brought out his knife and began placidly paring his nails.

"Huh!" grunted Mr. Shifter, and sat down. Without more ado he produced a check-book, uncapped a fountain-pen, and snarled at Matt, "What's your figure?"

Matt permitted an expression of doubt to play upon his features.

"Do I understand that you are asking me to——"

But the other cut him short with a savage growl.

"You know what I mean. I want that contract canceled. How much?"

Matt turned to his partner.

"Luke, he wants the contract canceled. How about it? Our organization is complete, and we are really only just getting into our stride."

Mitchell consulted the statement Matt had given him in the cab. He penciled on the back of it, the while Shifter sat surly and silent. Mitchell spoke:

"In round numbers, work orders turned in to date come to $29,000. That's an average of $1900 a day, or $114,000 for ten weeks. Commissions at twenty-five per cent., $28,500. Less commission paid to date, $21,225. That's the way it figures out."

"What?" Mr. Shifter's voice was a hoarse scream. "It's a hold-up! You——"

"Stop it!" Matt broke in on him sternly. "We didn't seek this interview. You came to us. Mitchell, you've forgotten the jardinières. We have five hundred dozen on hand—$2500. Add that in."

"Total, $23,725," announced Mitchell.

"Never!" yelled the laundryman.

His eyes bloodshot and protruding, his great jowls a-tremble, the sweat streaming down them, he was a lamentable picture of a man. Mitchell, disgusted at the sight, and mindful of Kitty's arraignment of him, felt, nevertheless, some small stirrings of compassion for the creature.

"I say, Matt," he began.

"We will cut off the odd hundreds," Matt decreed, "and not another cent. And we won't parley with you again, Shifter. We are ready to go on with our contract. There's $85,000 of work for you to handle yet. Speak quick. It's two-thirty. The banks close at three."

Had Matt been an oyster, however bad, the laundryman would have swallowed him then and there to murder him. He slammed his check-book shut, and made as if to rise. But at the thought of eighty-five thousand dollars more of work he dropped weakly back in his chair. It affrighted him. If the laundry ring should stick him up for increased commissions? If damage suits should pile up against him with the infamous Williams at their back? If—it was enough! With a groan that seemed to rend his vitals, he wrote the check.

VII

IT WAS the next evening. Matt in a quiet way was celebrating his rise to opulence; he was having Kitty out to dinner in a cool Summer-garden by the river. Mitchell had invented important letter-writing which kept him at the hotel.

"What do you say, little girl?" Matt was asking. "The organization is ready-made for you. Why can't you and the others get together and push the scheme for your mutual benefit? There's a way to do it."

"No! No! No!" broke in Kitty turbulently. "I'm afraid of it. See what it did to Shifter! Not for me, Matt. I'll have none of it, and that's final."

Matt sighed. He had six thousand jardinières on hand. They were paid for, and he had split up with Mitchell $24,443, less a day's wages to fifteen men, and the price of as many suits of clothes. He was, in brief, twelve thousand dollars to the good for three weeks' work; yet it sorrowed him to think of all those glittering jars accumulating storage charges for months to come.

"Perhaps you are right," he said to Kitty resignedly. "But you won't refuse to accept a trifling gift from me, bought with Shifter money; you wouldn't be afraid of that, would you? You did so much to help me."

Kitty glanced at him from under meditative brows.

"It depends," she answered. "What is it?"

Matt took a survey around. They were off in a corner overlooking a bend in the river. And there was a broad moon which made the pendent vari-colored lamps above them seem tawdry superfluities.

It affected Matt, the moon; it always did. "The devil's in the moon for mischief." Men, they say, go mad at times beneath it. Matt did not go so far as this, but it changed him. He forgot the jardinières. He grew mysterious, appealing; and his voice took on a deeper tone. It must be remembered that Kitty was a stunningly pretty girl.

"It is this," he said. "I hope you will like it."

He drew a small, kid-sheathed box from his pocket and opened it. A thousand dazzling sparks flashed out at Kitty.

"O-o-oh!" she cooed, and fell silent.

"May I put it on?" he begged tenderly. "With a wish?"

He reached out for her hand, but she drew it back quickly. And she said, stammering the words:

"I—I don't think you can. I—you see, Matt, there's some one else—oh, don't make me say it! Please!"

Matt recognized his mistake—and the moon had covered her face with a cloud. It was as if a cup of cold water had been dashed on him. He shivered at the nearness of the mishap. Yet he played his part out like a man and a gentleman.

"It is all right, Kitty," he assured her gravely. "I understand. But I want you to wear it because—because you are a trump, the best ever, and I wish you all the good luck in the world. You will know I meant it whenever you look at this."

"Oh, like that—yes!" consented Kitty; and she poked out a dexter finger right willingly. "You're a dear," she murmured, as he slipped on the ring.

"Well, that's something anyway," said Matt gratefully.

A LITTLE wizened, gray-whiskered old man was sitting with Luke Mitchell in the Central House lobby when Matt sauntered in after seeing Kitty home. He stopped in his tracks and looked at him hard. The little old man returned the look with a twinkling eye.

"Come on; I'm in the flesh," he encouraged. "Just ran over to see how you are getting on."

"I've told him. I said you'd hear from him again," boasted Mitchell.

Matt came forward and stuck out his hand. He was grinning.

"Didn't somebody say I was crazy with the heat?" he observed.

"A wrong diagnosis," acknowledged Old Pilkins with a wry smile. "Sit down. I want to talk with you. I hear you have some of those jars left."

"A few—forty-two gross," replied Matt easily. He was studying Old Pilkins' bewhiskered visage.

"I could use thirty of them," said that person promptly. It was his way; no beating around the bush.

"I see!" was Matt's answer. "That chap down in Rio has come to life. That's why you are here—thought, perhaps, I'd blown up by this time."

Mr. Pilkins nodded.

"Right! What's your price?"

Matt looked at Mitchell.

"What do you say, Luke?"

"I don't say. It's up to you."

"You can have," said Matt to the little man, "the entire lot at——"

"I said only thirty gross."

"The entire lot," repeated Matt steadily, "at cost to us—sixty dollars."

Mr. Pilkins, knowing the ways of men flushed with success, had calmly calculated on being held up at a stiff advance, and was prepared to pay it; for there was a handsome profit on the Rio order on anything under eighty dollars.

And, further, he was prepared to pay for his late error of judgment concerning Matt; he believed the smart still lingered. He was taken aback, therefore, to find he must again reverse his judgment. He had not counted on this display of magnanimity. But he was not the man to discover his feelings to public gaze.

“Done!” he agreed. “And by the way, Matthew, you've been working pretty hard over here. Why not take your vacation now—a month—my expense—and brace up for the Fall. I'm planning a campaign I want to talk over with you when you come back.”

Matt caught Mitchell's eye on him. He rebuked the mirth in it with a cold stare, and said to Old Pilkins seriously:

“Why, thank you, governor; that's mighty nice of you. A mighty fine thing. I'll do it.”

PARADISE BEND A FOUR PART STORY

By WILLIAM PATTERSON WHITE *Part One*

Author of “That Which is Written,” “A Pair of Queens,” etc.

CHAPTER I

TOM LOUDON

“AND DON'T forget that ribbon!” called Kate Saltoun from the ranch-house door. “And don't lose the sample!”

“I won't!” shouted Tom Loudon, turning in his saddle. “I'll get her just like you said! Don't you worry any!”

He waved his hat to Kate, faced about, and put his horse to a lope.

“Is it likely now I'd forget?” he muttered. “We'd do more'n that for her, wouldn't we, fellah?”

The horse, a long-legged chestnut named Ranger, turned back one ear. He was accustomed to being questioned, was Ranger. Tom Loudon loved him. He had bought him a five-year old from the 88 ranch the year before, and he would allow no one save Kate Saltoun to ride him. For the sun and the moon, in the estimation of Tom Loudon, rose and set in the black eyes of Kate Saltoun, the exceedingly handsome daughter of John T. Saltoun, the owner of the great Bar-S ranch.

This day Loudon was riding into Farewell for the ranch mail, and Kate had commissioned him to do an errand for her. To serve his lady was joy to Loudon. He did not believe that she was aware of his state of mind. A flirt was Kate, and a charming one. She played with a man as a cat plays with a mouse. At which pleasant sport Kate was an adept. But Loudon realized nothing of all this. Shrewd and penetrative in his business, where Kate was concerned he saw nothing but the obvious.

Where the trail snaked over Indian Ridge, ten miles from the ranch-house, Loudon pulled up in front of a lone pine tree. On the trunk of the pine a notice was tacked. Which notice set forth briefly that two hundred dollars reward was offered for the person or persons of the unknown miscreant or miscreants who were depleting the herds of the Bar-S and the Cross-in-a-box outfits. It was signed by Sheriff Block.

Who the miscreants were no one knew with certainty. But strange tales were told of the 88 punchers. It was whispered that they carried running-irons on their saddles. Certainly they displayed, when riding the range, a marked aversion to the company of men from the other ranches.

The remains of small fires had been found time and again in draws bordering the 88 range, and once a fire-marked cinch-ring had been picked up. As the jimmy and bunch of skeleton keys in a man's pocket so are the running-iron and the extra cinch-ring under a puncher's saddle-skirts. They indicate a criminal tendency; specifically, in the latter case, a whole-hearted willingness to brand the cattle of one's neighbor.

Loudon read the notice of reward, slow contempt curling his lips.

"Signs," he said gently. "Signs, ——! What they need is Vigilantes—Vigilantes an' a bale o' rope!"

He turned in his saddle and looked back over the way he had come. Fifty miles to the south the Frying-Pan mountains lay in a cool, blue, tumbling line.

From where Loudon sat on his horse to the Frying-Pans stretched the rolling range, cut by a thin, kinked strip of cotton woods marking the course of a wandering river, pock-marked with draws and shallow basins, blotched with clumps of pine and tamarack, and humped with knolls and sprawling hills. The meandering stream was the Lazy, and all the land in sight, and beyond for that matter, was the famous Lazy River country held by three great ranches, the Cross-in-a-box, the Bar-S, and the 88.

Of these the 88 was the largest and the farthest west of the three, its eastern line running along the highbluffed banks of the Falling Horse, into which the Lazy emptied some ten miles from the 88 ranch-house. East of the 88 lay the Bar-S, and east of the Bar-S was the Cross-in-a-box. The two latter ranches owned the better grazing, the more broken country lying within the borders of the 88 ranch.

Beyond the 88 range, across the Falling Horse, were the Three Sisters Mountains, a wild and jumbled tangle of peaks and narrow valleys where the hunter and the bear and the mountain-lion lived and had their beings. East of the Lazy River country lay the Double Diamond A and the Hog-pen outfits; north and south stretched other ranches, but all the ranges ended where the Three Sisters began.

Loudon swung his gaze westward, then slowly his eyes slid 'round and fastened on the little brown dots that were the ranch buildings of the Bar-S. He shook his head gently and sighed helplessly.

He was thinking partly of Kate and partly of her father, the gray old man who owned the Bar-S and would believe nothing evil of his neighbors, the hard-riding 88 boys. Loudon was morally certain that forty cows within the last three months had transferred their allegiance from Bar-S to 88, and he had hinted as much to Mr. Saltoun. But the latter had laughed him to scorn and insisted that only a few cows had been taken and that the lifting was the work of independent rustlers, or perhaps of one of the other ranches. Nevertheless, in response to the repeated urging of his foreman, Bill Rainey, Mr. Saltoun had joined with the Cross-in-a-box in offering a reward for the rustlers.

Loudon was well aware of the reason for Mr. Saltoun's fatuous blindness. That reason was Sam Blakely, the 88 manager, who came often to the Bar-S ranch and spent many hours in the company of Kate. Mr. Saltoun did not believe that a dog would bite the hand that fed him. But it all depends on the breed of dog. And Blakely was the wrong breed.

"He sure is a pup," Loudon said softly, "an' yellow at that. He'd steal the moccasins off a dead Injun. An' Block would help him, the cow-thief."

Then, being young, Loudon practised the road-agent's spin on the notice of reward tacked on the pine-tree, and planted three accurate bullets in the same spot.

"Here, you! What ye doin'?" rasped a grating voice in Loudon's immediate rear.

Loudon turned an unhurried head. Ten yards distant a tall man, black-bearded, of a disagreeable cast of countenance, was leaning forward across an outcrop.

"I asked ye what ye were doin'?" repeated the peevish individual, glaring at Loudon.

"I heard ye the first time, Sheriff," replied Loudon placidly. "I was just figurin' whether to tell ye I was shoein' a horse or catchin' butterflies. Which answer would ye like best?"

"Ye think yo're mighty funny, Tom Loudon, but I tell ye flat if ye don't go slow 'round here I'll find a quick way o' knockin' your horns off."

"Ye don't say. When ye goin' to begin?"

Loudon beamed upon the sheriff, his gun held with studied carelessness. Sheriff Block walked from behind his breastworks, his eyes watchful, his thumbs carefully hooked in the armholes of his vest.

"That notice ain't no target," he grunted, halting beside the pine-tree.

"It is now," remarked Loudon genially.

"It won't be no more."

"O' course not, Sheriff. I wouldn't think o' shootin' at it if you say no. It's a right pretty piece o' readin'. Did ye write it all yourself?"

The sheriff's eyes became suddenly blank and fixed. His right thumb slowly unhooked.

"I only fired three shots," observed Loudon, the muzzle of his six-shooter bearing on the pit of the sheriff's stomach.

The sheriff's right thumb rehooked itself hurriedly. His frame relaxed.

"Ye shouldn't get mad over a joke," continued Loudon. "It's plumb foolish. Been hidin' behind that rock long?"

"I wasn't hidin' behind it. I was down in the draw, an' I seen you a-readin' the notice, an' I come up."

Loudon's gray eyes twinkled. He knew that the sheriff lied. He knew that Block had heard his comments on Blakely and his own worshipful person, but evidently the sheriff did not consider this an opportune time for taking umbrage.

"So ye come up, did ye? Guess ye thought it was one o' the rustlers driftin' in to see what reward was out for him, didn't ye? But don't get downhearted. Maybe one'll come siftin' along yet. Why don't ye camp here, Sheriff? It'll be easier than ridin' the range for 'em, an' a heap healthier. Now, Sheriff, remember what I said 'bout gettin' redheaded. Say, between friends, an' I won't tell even the little hoss, who do you guess is doin' the rustlin'?"

"If I knowed," growled the sheriff, "his name'd be wrote on the notice."

"Would it? I was just wonderin'. Habit I got."

"Don't you fret none 'bout them rustlers. I'll get 'em if it takes ten years."

"Make it twenty, Sheriff. They'll keep right on electin' ye."

"Do ye mean to say the rustlers elected me?" exploded the sheriff.

"O' course not," chided Loudon gently. "Now what made ye think I meant that?

"Well, ye said—" began the sheriff.

"I said 'they,'" interrupted Loudon. "You said 'rustlers.' Stay in the saddle, Sheriff. Ye'll stub your toe sometime if ye keep on a-travelin' one jump ahead o' the hoss."

"Yo're —— smart for a cow-punch."

"It is a cinch to fool most of 'em, ain't it—especially when you're a sheriff?"

Loudon's eyes were wide open and childlike in their gray blandness. But the sheriff did not mistake his man. Block knew that if his hand dropped, a bullet would neatly perforate his abdomen. The sheriff was not a coward, but he had sense enough not to force an issue. He could afford to wait.

"I'll see ye again," said the sheriff harshly, and strode diagonally down the slope.

LOUDON watched him until he vanished among the pines a hundred yards below. Then Loudon touched his horse with the spur and rode on, chin on shoulder, hands busy reloading his six-shooter. Three minutes later Loudon saw the sheriff, mounted on his big black stallion issue from the wood. The great horse scrambled up the hillside, gained the trail, and headed south.

"Bet he's goin' to the 88," said Loudon. "I'd give ten dollars to know what Block was roostin' behind that rock for. ——! I sure would admire to be Sheriff o' Fort Creek County for thirty days!"

Eleven miles from Indian Ridge he topped a rise and saw below him Farewell's straggly street, flanked by several false-fronted saloons, two stores, one hotel leaning slightly askew, and a few unkempt houses, the whole encircled by the twinkling pickets of innumerable bottles and tin cans.

He rode along the street, fetlock-deep in dust, and stopped at the hotel corral. Freeing Ranger of the saddle and bridle, he opened the gate and slapped the chestnut on the hip.

"Go on in, fellah," said Loudon. "Yo're dinner's a-comin'."

He walked 'round to the front of the hotel. Under the wooden awning a beefy, red-faced citizen was dozing in a chair tilted back against the wall. Loudon tapped the snoring individual on the shoulder. The sleeper awoke gaspingly, his eyes winking. The chair settled on four legs with a crash.

"Howdy, Bill," said Loudon gravely.

"Howdy, Tom," gurgled the other.

"Hoss in the corral an' me here, Bill. Feeds for two."

"Sure. We've done et, but you go in an' holler for Lize. She'll fix you up."

The fat landlord waddled stablewards, and Loudon entered the hotel. A partition that did not reach the ceiling divided the sleeping-apartments from the dining-room. Carelessly hanging over the partition were two shirts and some one's chaps.

The whole floor slanted, for, as has been said, the hotel leaned sidewise. The long table in the dining-room, covered with cracked and scaling oilcloth, was held unsteadily upright by three legs and a cracker box.

Loudon, quite untouched by this scene of shiftlessness, hooked out a chair with his foot, dropped his hat on the floor, and sat down.

"Oh, Mis' Lainey!" he called.

A female voice, somewhat softened by distance and a closed door, instantly began to make oration to the effect that if any lazy chunker of a puncher thought he was to eat any food he was very much mistaken.

The door banged open. A slatternly, scrawny woman appeared in the doorway. She was still talking. But the clacking tongue changed its tone abruptly.

"Oh, it's you, Tom Loudon!" exclaimed the lean woman. "How are ye, anyway? I'm sure glad to see ye. I thought ye was one o' them rousy fellers, an' I wouldn't rustle no more chuck this noon for the likes o' them, not if they was starvin' an' their tongues was hangin' out a foot. But you're different, an' I ain't never forgot the time you rode thirty mile for a doc. when my young one was due to cash. No, you bet I ain't! Now don't you say nothin'. You jest set right patient a short spell an' I'll rustle——"

The door swung shut, and the remainder of the sentence was lost in a muffled din of pans. Loudon winked at the closed door and grinned.

He had known the waspish Mrs. Lainey and her paunchy husband since that day when, newly come to the Lazy River country, he had met them, their buckboard wrecked by a runaway and their one child apparently dying of internal injuries. Though Loudon always minimized what he had done, Mrs. Lainey and her husband did not. And they were not folk whose memories are short.

In less than twenty minutes Mrs. Lainey brought in a steak, fried potatoes and coffee. The steak was fairly tough, so were the potatoes, and the coffee required a copious quantity of condensed milk to render it drinkable. But Loudon ate with a rider's appetite. Mrs. Lainey, arms folded in her apron, leaned against the door-jamb, and regaled him with the news of Farewell.

"Injun Joe got drunk las' week an' tried to hogtie Riley's bear. It wasn't hardly worth while buryin' Joe, but they done it. Mis' Stonestreet has a new baby. This un makes the twelfth. Yep, day before yestiddy. Charley's so proud over it he ain't been sober since. Slep' in the waterin'-trough las' night, so he did, an' this mornin' he was drunk as ever. But he never did do things by halves, that Charley Stonestreet. Ain't the heat awful? Yep, it's worse'n that. Did ye hear about——"

Poor, good-hearted Mrs. Lainey! With her, speech was a disease. Loudon ate as hurriedly as he could, and fled to the sidewalk. Bill Lainey, who had fallen asleep again, roused sufficiently to accept six bits.

"Mighty drowsy weather, Tom," he mumbled.

"It must be," said Loudon. "So long."

Leaving the sleepy Lainey to resume his favorite occupation, Loudon walked away. Save Lainey, no human beings were visible on the glaring street. In front of the Palace Saloon two cow-ponies drooped. Near the post-office stood another, bearing on its hip the Cross-in-a-box brand.

From the door of the post-office issued the loud and cheerful tones of a voice whose owner was well pleased with the world at large.

"Guess I'll get that ribbon first," said Loudon to himself, and promptly walked behind the post-office.

He had recognized the cheerful voice. It was that of his friend, Johnny Ramsay, who punched for the Cross-in-a-box outfit. And not for a month's pay would Loudon have had Johnny Ramsay see him purchasing yards of red ribbon. Ramsay's sense of humor was too well developed.

When four houses intervened between himself and the post-office Loudon returned to the street and entered the Blue Pigeon Store. Compared with most western frontier stores the Blue Pigeon was compactly neat. A broad counter fenced off three sides of the store proper.

Behind the counter, lines of packed shelves lined the walls from floor to ceiling. Between the counter and the shelves knotted ropes, a long arm's-length apart, depended from the rafters. Above the canvas curtained doorway in the rear, hung the model of a black-hulled, slim-sparred clipper.

At the jingle of Loudon's spurs on the floor the canvas curtain was pushed aside, and the proprietor shuffled and thumped, for his left leg was of wood, into the store. He was a red-headed man, was Mike Flynn, the proprietor, barrel-chested, hairy-armed, and even the backs of his ham-like hands were tattooed.

"Good aft'noon to ye, Tom," said Mike Flynn. "'Tis a fine day—hot, mabbe, but I've seen worse in the Horse Latitudes. An' what is it the day?"

"Red ribbon, Mike," replied Loudon, devoutly thankful that no other customer was in the store.

Mike glanced at the sample in Tom Loudon's hand.

"Sure, an' I have that same, width an' all," he said, and forthwith seizing one of the knotted ropes he pulled himself hand over hand to the top shelf.

Hanging by one hand he fumbled a moment, then lowered himself to the floor.

"An' here ye are!" he exclaimed. "The finest ribbon that ever come West. Matches the bit ye have like a twin brother. One dollar two bits a yard."

"I'll take five yards."

"Won't ye be needin' a new necktie now?" inquired Mike Flynn, expertly measuring off the ribbon. "I've a fine lot in—grane ones, an' blue ones, an' purple ones wit' white spots, an' some black ones wit' red an' yaller figgers, not to spake o' some yaller ones wit' vi'let horseshoes. Very fancy, thim last. God be with the ould days! Time was when I'd not have touched yaller save wit' me foot, but 'tis so long since I've hove a brick at an Orangeman that the ould feelin' ain't near so strong as it was. An' here's the ribbon, Tom. About them neckties now. They're worth seein'. One minute an' I'll delight yer eyes."

Rapidly Mike Flynn stumped 'round to the other side of the room, pulled down several long boxes and deftly laid them, covers off, on the counter. Loudon did need a new necktie. What man in love does not? He passed over the yellow ones with violet horseshoes so strongly recommended by Mike Flynn, and bought one of green silk.

"Ye're a lad after me own heart, Tom Loudon," said Mike Flynn, wrapping the necktie. "Grane's best when all's said an' done. The color of ould Ireland, God bless her. An' here comes Johnny Ramsay."

Loudon hastily stuffed his purchases inside his flannel shirt, and in a careless tone asked for a box of forty-five caliber cartridges. He turned just in time to ward off the wild rush of Johnny Ramsay, who endeavored to seize him by the belt and waltz him round the store.

"Wow! Wow!" yelled Johnny. "How's Tommy? How's the boy? Allemane left, you old bronc buster!"

"Quit it, you idjit!" bawled Loudon, the crushing of ribbon and necktie being imminent.

Ramsay stepped back and prodded Loudon's breast with an inquiring finger.

"Paddin'," he said solemnly. "Tryin' to give yourself a chest, ain't ye, you old beanpole? Ouch!"

For Loudon had dug a hard knuckle into his friend's left side, and it was Ramsay's turn to yell. From behind the counter Mike Flynn beamed upon them. He liked them well, these careless youngsters of the range, and their antics were a source of never-ending amusement.

Entered then a tall, lean man with black hair, and a face, the good looks of which were somewhat marred by a thin-lipped mouth and sharp, sinister eyes. But for all that Sam Blakely, the manager of the 88 ranch, was a very handsome man. He nodded to the three, his lips parting over white teeth, and asked Mike Flynn for a rope.

"Here's yer cartridges, Tom," called Mike, and turned to the rear of the store.

Loudon picked up his box of cartridges, stuffing them into a pocket in his chaps.

"Let's irrigate," he said to Ramsay.

"In a minute," replied his friend. "I want some cartiridges my own self."

The two sat down on the counter to wait. Blakely strolled across to the open boxes of neckties.

"Cravats," he sneered, fingering them.

"An' —— fine ones!" exclaimed Mike Flynn, slamming down the coil of rope on the counter. "Thim yaller ones wit' vi'let spots now, ye couldn't beat 'em in New York. An' the grand grane ones. Ain't they the little beauts? I just sold one to Tom Loudon."

"Green sure does suit some people," said the 88 manager coldly.

Loudon felt Johnny Ramsay stiffen beside him. But Loudon merely smiled a slow, pleasant smile.

"Hirin' any new men, Sam?" he inquired softly, his right hand cuddling close to his belt.

"What do ye want to know for?" demanded Blakely wheeling.

"Why, ye see, I was thinkin' o' quittin' the Bar-S, an' I'd sort o' like to get with a good, progressive outfit, one that don't miss any chances."

Loudon's voice was clear and incisive. Each word fell with the precision of a pebble falling into a well. Mike Flynn backed swiftly out of range.

"What do ye mean by that?" demanded Blakely, his gaze level.

"What I said," replied Loudon, staring into the other's sinister black eyes. "I sure do hate to translate my words."

For a long minute the two men gazed steadily at each other. Neither made a move. Blakely's hand hung at his side. Loudon's hand had not yet touched his gun-butt. But Blakely could not know that, for Loudon's crossed knees concealed the position of his hand.

Loudon was giving Blakely an even chance. He knew that Blakely was quick on the draw, but he believed that he himself was quicker. Blakely evidently thought so too, for suddenly he grunted and turned his back on Loudon.

"What's that?" inquired Blakely, pointing a finger at one end of the rope.

"What!—oh that!" exclaimed Mike. "Sure, that's what a seaman calls whippin'. The holdfast was missin', an' the rope was beginnin' to unlay, so I whipped the end of it. 'Twill keep the rope from frayin' out, do ye mind. An' it's the last rope I have in stock, too."

Loudon, watching Blakely's hands, saw that what Mike Flynn called whipping was whip-cord lapped tightly a dozen turns or so round the end of the rope. Blakely, without another word, paid for the rope, picked it up, and departed, head high, sublimely indifferent to the presence of Loudon. Mike Flynn heaved a heartfelt sigh of relief.

"Praise be!" he ejaculated. "I'd thought to lose a customer a minute back." Then, recollecting himself, he added quickly, "What was that ye said about cartridges, Johnny?"

CHAPTER II

AT THE BAR-S

"THAT'S a good-lookin' goat," observed cheerful Johnny Ramsay, watching Loudon throw the saddle on the long-legged chestnut. "All he needs is horns an' a *ma-a-a.*"

"What particular tune can you play on it?" retorted Loudon, passing the cinch-strap.

"On what?" inquired Ramsay incautiously.

"On that four-legged accordeon ye're straddlin'."

"I wouldn't say nothin' about no accordeons—not if I was abusin' a poor billy by cinchin a hull on his back. Honest, Tommy, don't ye like ridin' a hoss? 'Fraid he'll throw ye or somethin'?"

"Don't ye worry none about this little cayuse. He's all hoss, he is, an' if ye don't mind, Johnny, I'd be a heap obliged if ye'd follow behind when we ride out o' town. Somebody might see us together an' take ye for a friend o' mine, an' that wouldn't do nohow."

"Please, mister," whined Johnny Ramsay, "let me go with ye. I know where there's a pile o' nice tomatter cans for the goat's supper. Red Rose tomatter cans too. There's more nourishment in them kind than there is in the Blue Star brand. Hey, quit!"

Loudon had suddenly flipped a broken horseshoe at the hindquarters of Ramsay's pony, that surprised animal going into the air immediately. When Ramsay had quieted his wild-eyed mount, the two friends rode away together.

"I wonder why Blakely didn't go to it,"

remarked Ramsay, when Farewell lay behind them.

"Dunno," said Loudon. "He wasn't afraid, ye can gamble on that."

"I ain't none so sure. He's bad plumb through, Blakely is. An' he's a killer, by his eyes. I guess it was just the extra shade he wanted, an' the extra shade wasn't there. You'd 'a' got him, Tom."

"Sure! But don't ye make no mistake about Blakely bein' a coward. He ain't. He's seen trouble, an' seen it in the smoke."

"You mean Skinner Jack. Well, Jack wasn't slow with a gun, but the other two was Injuns, an' they only had Winchesters, an' Blakely he had a Sharp's. So ye can't tally the war-whoops. An' I did hear how Skinner Jack was drunk when he called Blakely a liar."

"I doubt it. Skinner could always hold his red-eye. More likely his gun caught."

"Anyway, Tommy, you'd better not go cavortin' about on the skyline too plenteous. It wouldn't bother Blakely none to bushwhack ye."

"Oh, he wouldn't do that. He ain't the bushwhackin' kind."

"Oh, ain't he? Now just because he ain't never done nothin' like that, it don't prove he won't. He's got a killer's eyes, I tell ye, an' drillin' ye would tickle him to death. Ye run a blazer on him, an' he quit cold. Other gents seen the play. He won't never forget that. He'll down ye on the square, or what looks like an even break, if he can. But if he can't he'll down ye anyway."

"Rustlers ramblin' over yore way any?" inquired Loudon in a meaning tone.

Johnny Ramsay struck his saddle-horn a resounding thwack with his open palm.

"If we could only get him that way!" he exclaimed. "But he's slicker'n axle-grease."

"The 88 will brand one calf too many some day. Hell's delight! What do they do with 'em? Ye ride the range an' ye ride the range an' ye don't find no cows with unhealed brands. I seen twelve, though, with the 88 brand that looked like some gent had been addin' to Bar-S with a runnin'-iron. But the brands was all healed up. Anyway, we've lost forty cows, an' I dunno how many calves."

"They'll turn up again."

"Sure—carryin' the 88 brand. My idea is that them rustlers brand 'em an' then hold 'em in some blind cañon over near the Fallin' Horse till the burns heal up, an' then they throw 'em loose on the range again. If the cows do drift across to the Bar-S, what's the dif? They got the 88 brand."

"That sounds good. Why don't ye take a little wander 'round the scenery near the Fallin' Horse?"

"I have; I didn't see nothin'. But they got 'em hid somewhere all right. One day I runs across Marvin, an' I had a job losin' him. He stuck to me closer'n tar all day. He was worried some, I seen that."

"Goin' back?"

"Till I find their cache I am."

"That's another reason for makin' Blakely so friendly. He knows ye won't stop lookin'. Ain't it the devil an' all? The measly Sheriff just squats down on his hunkers an' does nothin' while we lose cows in car-lots. An' when our cows go, we kiss 'em good-by. They never come back—not even with their brand altered. Ye can't change Cross-in-a-box to 88."

"With the Bar-S it's a cinch. But the boss won't take another brand. Not him. He'll stick to Bar-S till he ain't got a cow to run the iron on."

"Oh, it's a great system the 88 outfit are workin'! An' with Sheriff Block an' most all o' Marysville an' Farewell their friends it's a hard game to buck. Talk o' law! There ain't none in Fort Creek County."

"The only play is Vigilantes, an' it can't come to them till there's proof. We all know Blakely an' the 88 bunch are up to their hocks in this rustlin' deal, but we can't prove it."

"There's the worst o' bein' straight," complained Johnny Ramsay. "Ye know some tinhorn is a-grabbin' all ye own. Yo're certain sure who the gent is, but ye can't hop out an' bust him without ye catch him a-grabbin' or else a-wearin' yore pet pants."

"That's whatever," agreed Loudon.

Five miles out of Farewell, where the trail forked, one branch leading southeast to the Cross-in-a-box, the other to the Bar-S, Loudon checked his horse.

"Keep a-goin'," said Johnny Ramsay. "I'm travelin' with you a spell. I'm kind o' sick o' that old trail. I've rode it so frequent I know all the rocks an' the cottonwood by their first names."

Which explanation Loudon did not accept at its face value. He understood perfectly why Ramsay continued to ride with him. Ramsay believed that Blakely would endeavor to drop Loudon from ambush, and it is well known that a gentleman lying in wait for another will often stay his hand when his intended victim is accompanied. Neither Loudon nor Ramsay made any mention of the true inwardness of his thoughts. They had been friends for a long time.

CLIMBING the long slope of Indian Ridge, they scanned the trail warily. But nowhere did the hoofprints of Blakely's horse leave the dust of the trail. On the reverse slope of the ridge they picked up the larger hoofprints of Block's horse. Fair and plain the two sets of marks led southward.

"Wonder who the other gent was," hazarded Ramsay.

"Block," said Loudon. "I met him this mornin'. I was puttin' holes in his notice, an' he didn't like it none."

"Did he chatter much?"

"He talked a few, but nothin' to hurt."

"The tinhorn!" laughed Ramsay. "Bet he's goin' to the 88."

"It's some likely. We'll know when we reach Long Coulee."

They reached Long Coulee, where the trail to the 88 swung westward, as the sun was dropping behind the faraway peaks of the Three Sisters Moutains. Loudon slipped his feet from the stirrups and stretched luxuriously. But he did not feel luxurious.

As he had expected, Block had turned into the 88 trail, but as he had not expected Blakely had ridden straight on toward the Bar-S. Which latter event was disquieting, not because Loudon feared an act of violence on the part of Blakely, but because Kate's evening would be preempted by his enemy.

Loudon keenly desired to talk to Kate that evening. He had a great many things to tell her, and now the coming of Blakely spoiled it all.

"The nerve o' some folks," remarked Johnny Ramsay, eying the tracks of Blakely's horse with disfavor. "Better tell old Salt to lock up the silver an' the cuckoo clock. No offense now, Tommy, but if I was you, I'd sleep in the corral tonight. Blakely might take a fancy to the goat."

"I sure hope he does," grinned Loudon. "It would ease the strain some."

"Make it complete, old beanpole, when you do call the turn. Well, I got to be skippin'. Give my love to old Salt. So-long."

"So-long."

Johnny Ramsay picked up his reins, wheeled his pony and fox-trotted away. He felt that further accompanying of Loudon was unnecessary. The danger of an ambush was past. Riding with Loudon had taken Ramsay some fifteen miles out of his way, and twenty-five long miles lay between his pony's nose and the corral bars of the Cross-in-a-box ranch. But Ramsay wasted not a thought on his lengthened journey. He would have ridden cheerfully across the territory and back again in order to benefit a friend.

"Come on, fellah," said Loudon, when Ramsay had gone.

The chestnut moved off at a walk. Loudon did not hurry him. He took out his papers and tobacco and rolled a cigarette with neatness and despatch. Tilting back his head, he blew the first lungful of smoke straight up into the air.

"It wouldn't be right for her to marry him," he observed. "She sure is one pretty girl. I wonder now if I have got any chance. She's rich, an' I ain't, but I sure do love her a lot. Kate Loudon—that's a right nice-soundin' name."

He lowered his head and smoked silently for several minutes. The horse, reins on his neck, swung along steadily.

"Ranger fellah," said Loudon, "she'd ought to be willin' to wait till we make a stake, oughtn't she now? That's right. Wiggle one ear for yes. You know, don't ye, old tiger-eye?"

When the lights of the ranch sparked across the flat, Ranger pointed his ears, lifted his head and broke into a fox-trot. Passing the ranch-house, on his way to the corral, Loudon heard the merry tinkle of a guitar. Through an open window Loudon saw the squat figure of Mr. Saltoun bent over a desk. On the porch, in the corner where the hammock hung, flickered the glowing tip of a cigarette. With a double thrum of swept strings the guitar-player in the hammock swung from "The Kerry Dance" into "Loch Lomond."

Loudon swore under his breath, and rode on.

Jimmy, the cook, and Chuck Morgan, one of the punchers, were lying in their bunks squabbling over the respective merits of Texas and New Mexico when Loudon entered the bunkhouse. Both men immediately ceased wrangling and demanded letters.

"I ain't read 'em all yet," replied Loudon, dropping his saddle and bridle in a corner. "Wait till tomorrow."

"Jimmy's expectin' one from a red-headed gal," grinned Chuck Morgan. "He's been restless all day. 'Will she write?' says he, 'an' I wonder if she's sick or somethin'.' Don't you worry none, cookie. Them red-headed gals live forever. They're tough, same as a yaller hoss."

"You shut up!" exclaimed Jimmy. "Who'd write to you, you frazzled end of a misspent life? D'jever look at yoreself in the glass? You! Huh! Gimme my letter, Tommy."

"Letter? What letter? I didn't say there was a letter for ye."

"Well, ain't there?"

"You gimme somethin' to eat, an' then we'll talk about letters."

"You got a nerve!" roared the cook indignantly. "Comin' rollickin' in 'round midnight an' want yore chuck! Well, there it is"— indicating Chuck Morgan—"go eat it."

"You fry him an' I will. I'll gamble he wouldn't taste any worse than them steaks you've been dishin' out lately."

"You punchers gimme a pain," growled the cook, swinging his legs out o' the bunk. "Always eatin', eatin'. I never seen nothin' like it nohow."

"He's sore 'cause Buff put a little dead snake in his bunk," explained Chuck Morgan placidly. "Just a little snake—not more'n three foot long at the outside. He sure is the most fault-findin' feller, that Jimmy is."

"There ain't anythin' for ye, Chuck," said Loudon. "Here's yore letter, Jimmy."

The cook seized the grimy missive and retreated to his kitchen. Twenty minutes later Loudon was eating supper. He ate leisurely. He was in no hurry to go up to the ranch-house.

"Got the makin's!" Chuck Morgan's voice was a roar.

"Be careful," said Loudon, turning a slow head. "Yo're liable to strain yore throat, an' for a fellah talkin' as much as you do, that would sure be a calamity."

"It sure would," agreed Morgan. "I only asked ye for the makin's three times before I hollered."

"Holler first next time," advised Loudon, tossing paper and tobacco across to Morgan. "Have ye got matches? Per'aps ye'd like me to roll ye a pill an' then light it for ye?"

"Oh, that ain't necessary; none whatever. I got matches. They're all I got left. This aft'noon Jimmy says 'gimme a pipeful,' an' I wants to say right here that any jigger that'll smoke a pipe will herd sheep. 'Gimme a load,' says Jimmy. 'Sure,' says I, an' Jimmy bulges up holdin' the father of all corncobs in his hand. I forks over my bag, an' Jimmy wades in to fill the pipe. But that pipe don't fill up for a plugged nickel.

"He upends my bag, shakes her empty, an' hands her back. 'Thanks,' says Jimmy. 'That's all right,' I says, 'keep the bag too. It'll fit in right handy to mend your shirt with maybe.' Come to find out, that pipe o' Jimmy's hadn't no bottom in her, an' all the tobacco run through an' into a bag Jimmy was holdin' underneath. A reg'lar Injun trick, that is. Ye can't tell me Jimmy ain't been a squaw-man. Diggee Injuns, too, I'll bet."

Jimmy, leaning against the door-jamb, laughed uproariously.

"Yah," he yelped. "I'll teach ye to steal my pies, I will. Two apple-pies, Tom. Bran'-new they was, an' I was a coolin' 'em behin' the house, an' along comes Chuck an' glaums both of 'em, the hawg."

Leaving the two wrangling it out between them, Loudon pushed back his chair and went to the door. For a time he stood looking out into the night. Then he went to his saddle, picked up the bag containing the mail for Mr. Saltoun, and left the bunkhouse.

On the way to the ranch-house he took out of his shirt the parcel of ribbon and smoothed it out. Skirting the house on the side farthest from the porch-corner where sat Kate and Blakely, Loudon entered the kitchen and walked through the dining-room to the open doorway of the office. Mr. Saltoun half-turned at Loudon's entrance.

"Hello," said Mr. Saltoun, screwing up his eyes. "I was just wonderin' when you'd pull in."

"'Lo," returned Loudon; "here's the mail, an' here's a package for Miss Kate."

There was a rush of skirts, and handsome, black-haired Kate Saltoun, her dark eyes dancing, stood in the doorway.

"Did you get my ribbon, Tom?" cried

she, and pounced on the flat parcel before Loudon could reply.

She smiled and glowed and held the ribbon under her olive chin, exclaimed over it and thanked Loudon all in a breath. Her father beamed upon her. He loved this handsome girl of his.

"Come out on the porch, Tom," said Kate, "when you're through with father. Mr. Blakely's here. Thank you again for bringing my ribbon."

Kate swished away, and Mr. Saltoun's beaming expression vanished also. Mr. Saltoun was not especially keen. He rarely saw anything save the obvious, but for several weeks he had been under the impression that Kate and this tall, lean puncher with the gray eyes were too friendly.

And here was Kate, while entertaining the 88 manager, inviting Loudon to join her on the porch. Mr. Saltoun was ambitious for his daughter. He had not the remotest intention of receiving into his family a forty-dollar-a-month cowhand. He would have relished firing Loudon. But the latter was a valuable man. He was the best rider and roper in the outfit. Good cowboys do not drift in on the heels of every vagrant breeze.

Mr. Saltoun resolved to keep an eye on Loudon and arrange matters so that Kate and the puncher should meet seldom, if at all. He knew better than to speak to his daughter. That would precipitate matters.

By long experience Mr. Saltoun had learned that opposition always stiffened Kate's determination. From babyhood her father had spoiled her. Consequently the Kate of twenty-three was hopelessly intractable.

Mr. Saltoun drummed on the desk-top with a pencil. Loudon shifted his feet. He had mumbled a non-committal reply to Kate's invitation. Not for a great deal would he have joined the pair on the porch. But Mr. Saltoun did not know that.

"Chuck tells me," said Mr. Saltoun suddenly, "that he jerked five cows out o' that mud-hole on Pack-saddle Creek near Box Hill. Yeah, that one. Tomorrow I want ye to ride along the Pack-saddle an' take a look at them other two holes between Box Hill an' Fishtail Cooley. If ye see any cows driftin' west, head 'em east. When that —— barb-wire comes—if it ever does, an' I ordered it a month ago—you an' Chuck can fence them three mud-holes. Better get an early start, Tom."

"All right," said Loudon, and made an unhurried withdrawal—by way of the kitchen.

Once in the open air Loudon smiled a slow smile. He had correctly divined the tenor of his employer's thoughts. Before he reached the bunk-house Loudon had resolved to propose to Kate Saltoun within forty-eight hours.

CHAPTER III

SHOTS ON PACK-SADDLE

"I woke up one mornin' on the old Chisolm trail,
Rope in my hand an' a cow by the tail.
Crippled my hoss, I don't know how,
Ropin' at the horns of a 2-U cow."

SO SANG Loudon, carrying saddle and bridle to the corral in the blue light of dawn. Chuck Morgan was before him at the corral, and wrestling with a fractious gray pony.

"Whoa! ye son of sin!" yelled Morgan, wrenching the pony's ear. "Stand still, or I'll sure cave in your slats!"

"Kick him again," advised Loudon, flicking the end of his rope across the back of a yellow beast with a black mane and tail.

The yellow horse stopped trotting instantly. He was rope-broke. It was unnecessary to "fasten," thanks to Loudon's training.

"They say ye oughtn't to exercise right after eatin'," continued Loudon genially. "An' yo're mussin' up this nice corral, too, Chuck."

"I'll muss up this nice little gray devil!" gasped Chuck. "When I git on him I'll sure plow the hide offen him. —— his soul! He's half mule."

"He takes ye for a relative!" called Jimmy, who had come up unobserved. "Relatives never do git along nohow!"

Jimmy fled, pursued by pebbles. The panting and outraged Chuck returned to his task of passing the rear cinch. Still swearing, he joined Loudon at the gate. The two rode away together.

"That sorrel o' Blakely's," observed Chuck, his fingers busy with paper and tobacco, "is sure as pretty as a little red wagon."

"Yeah," mumbled Loudon.

"I was noticin' him this mornin',"

continued Chuck Morgan. "He's got the cleanest set o' legs I ever seen."

"This mornin'," said Loudon slowly. "Where'd ye see Blakely's sorrel this mornin'?"

"In the little corral. He's in there with the Old Man's string."

Loudon pulled his hat forward and started methodically to roll a cigarette. So Blakely had spent the night at the ranch. This was the first time he had ever stayed overnight.

What did it mean? Calling on Kate was one thing, but spending the night was quite another.

With the fatuous reasoning of a man deeply in love, Loudon refused to believe that Blakely could be sailing closer to the wind of Kate's affections than he himself. Yet there remained the fact of Blakely's stay.

"We've been losin' right smart o' cows lately," remarked Chuck Morgan.

"What's the use o' talkin'?" exclaimed Loudon bitterly. "The Old Man says we ain't, an' he's the boss."

"He won't say so after the round-up. He'll sweat blood then. If I could only catch one of 'em at it. Just one. But them thievin' 88 boys are plumb wise. An' the Old Man thinks they're little he-angels with four wings apiece."

"Ye can't tell *him* nothin'. He knows."

"An' Blakely comes an' sets 'round, an' the Old Man laps up all he says like a cat, an' Blakely grins behind his teeth. I'd sure like to know his opinion o' the Old Man."

"An' us."

"An' us. Sure. The Old Man can't be expected to know as much as us. You can gamble an' go the limit Blakely has us sized up for sheep-woolly baa-lambs."

Morgan made a gesture of exasperation.

"We will be sheep!" exclaimed Loudon, "If we don't pick up somethin' agin' the 88 before the round-up. We're full-sized two-legged men, ain't we? Got eyes, ain't we? There ain't nothin' the matter with our hands, is there? Yet them 88 boys put it all over our shirt. Blakely's right. We're related plumb close to sheep, an' blind sheep at that."

"Them 88 boys have all the luck," grunted Chuck Morgan. "But their luck will sure break if I see any of 'em a foolin' with our cows. So-long."

* * *

CHUCK MORGAN rode off eastward. His business was with the cattle near Cow Creek, which stream was one of the two dividing the Bar-S range from that of the Cross-in-a-box. Loudon, his eyes continually sliding from side to side, loped onward. An hour later he forded the Lazy River, and rode along the bank to the mouth of Pack-saddle Creek.

The course he was following was not the shortest route to the two mud-holes between Box Hill and Fishtail Coulee. But south of the Lazy the western line of the Bar-S was marked by Pack-saddle Creek, and Loudon's intention was to ride along the creek from mouth to source.

There had been no rain for a month. If any cows had been driven across the stream he would know it. Twice before he had ridden the line of the creek, but his labors had not been rewarded. Yet Loudon did not despair. His was a hopeful soul.

Occasionally, as he rode, he saw cows. Here and there on the bank were cloven hoof-prints, showing where cattle had come down to drink. But none of them had crossed since the rain. And there were no marks of ponies' feet.

At the mud-hole near Box Hill a lone cow stood belly-deep, stolidly awaiting death.

"Ye poor idjit," commented Loudon, and loosed his rope from the saddle-horn.

The loop settled 'round the cow's horns. The yellow pony, cunningly holding his body sidewise that the saddle might not be pulled over his tail, strained with all four legs.

"C'mon, Lemons!" encouraged Loudon. "C'mon, boy! Ye old yellow lump o' bones! Heave! Head or cow, she's got to come!"

Thus adjured the pony strove mightily. The cow also exerted itself. Slowly the tenacious grip of the mud was broken. With a suck and a plop the cow surged free. It stood, shaking its head.

Swiftly Loudon disengaged his rope, slapped the cow with the end of it, and urged the brute inland.

Having chased the cow a full half mile he returned to the mud-hole and dismounted. For he had observed that upon a rock ledge above the mud-hole which he wished to inspect more closely. What he had noted was a long scratch across the face of the broad flat ledge of rock. But for his having been drawn in close to the ledge by the presence of the cow in the mud-hole, this single scratch would undoubtedly have escaped his attention.

Loudon leaned over and scrutinized the scratch. It was about a foot long, a quarter of an inch broad at one end, tapering roughly to a point. Ordinarily such a mark would have interested Loudon not at all, but under the circumstances it might mean much. The side-slip of a horse's iron-shod hoof had made it. This was plain enough. It was evident, too, that the horse had been ridden. A riderless horse does not slip on gently sloping rocks.

Other barely visible abrasions showed that the horse had entered the water. Why had some one elected to cross at this point? Pack-saddle Creek was fordable in many places. Below the mud-hole four feet and less was the depth. But opposite the rock ledge was a scour-hole fully ten feet deep, shallowing to eight in the middle of the stream. Here was no crossing for an honest man in his senses. But for one of questionable purpose, anxious to conceal his trail as much as possible, no better could be chosen.

"Good thing his hoss slipped," said Loudon, and returned to the waiting Lemons.

Mounting his horse he forded the creek and rode slowly along the bank. Opposite the lower end of the ledge he found that which he sought. In the narrow belt of bare ground between the water's edge and the grass were the tracks of several cows and one pony. Straight up from the water the trail led, and vanished abruptly when it reached the grass.

"Five cows," said Loudon. "Nothin' mean about that jigger."

He bent down to examine the tracks more closely, and as he stooped a rifle cracked faintly, and a bullet whisped over his bowed back.

Loudon jammed home both spurs, and jumped Lemons forward. Plying his quirt, he looked over his shoulder.

A puff of smoke suddenly appeared above a rock a quarter of a mile downstream and on the other side of the creek. The bullet tucked into the ground close beside the pony's drumming hoofs.

Loudon jerked his Winchester from its scabbard under his leg, turned in the saddle, and fired five shots as rapidly as he could work the lever. He did not expect to score a hit, but earnestly hoped to shake the hidden marksman's aim. He succeeded but lamely.

The enemy's third shot cut through his shirt under the left armpit, missing the flesh by a hair's-breadth. Loudon raced over the lip of a swell just as a fourth shot ripped through his hat.

Hot and angry, Loudon jerked Lemons to a halt half-way down the reverse slope. Leaving his horse tied to the ground he ran back and lay down below the crest. He removed his hat and wriggled forward to the top.

Cautiously lifting his head he surveyed the position of his unknown opponent. A half-mile distant, on the Bar-S side of the Pack-saddle, was the rock which sheltered the marksman. A small dark dot appeared above it.

Taking a long aim Loudon fired at the dot. As he jerked down the lever to reload, a gray smoke-puff mushroomed out at the lower right-hand corner of the rock, and a violent shock at the elbow numbed his right hand.

Loudon rolled swiftly backward, sat up, and stared wonderingly at his two hands. One held his Winchester, but gripped in the cramped fingers of the right hand was the bent and broken lever of the rifle. The bullet of the sharpshooting citizen had struck the lever squarely on the upper end, snapped the pin, torn loose the lever, and hopelessly damaged the loading mechanism.

"That jigger can sure handle a gun," remarked Loudon. "If this ain't one lovely fix for a Christian! Winchester no good, only a six-shooter, and a fully organized miracle-worker a-layin' for my hide. I'm a-goin' somewhere, an' I'm goin' right now."

He dropped the broken lever and rubbed his numbed fingers till sensation returned. Then he put on his hat and hurried down to his horse.

He jammed the rifle into the scabbard, mounted and rode swiftly southward, taking great pains to keep to the low ground.

A mile farther on he forded the creek and gained the shelter of an outflung shoulder of Box Hill.

Near the top Loudon tied Lemons to a tree and went forward on foot. Cautiously as an Indian, Loudon traversed the flat top of the hill and squatted down in a bunch of tall grass between two pines. From this vantage-point his field of view was wide. The rock ledge and the mud-hole were in plain sight. So was the rock from which he had been fired upon. It was a long mile distant, and it lay near the crest of a low hog's-back close to the creek.

"He's got his hoss down behind the swell," muttered Loudon. "Wish this hill was higher."

Loudon pondered the advisability of climbing a tree. He wished very much to obtain a view of the depression behind the hog's-back. He finally decided to remain where he was. It was just possible that the hostile stranger might be provided with field-glasses. In which case tree-climbing would invite more bullets, and the shooting of the enemy was too nearly accurate for comfort.

Loudon settled himself comfortably in his bunch of grass and watched intently. Fifteen or twenty minutes later what was apparently a part of the rock detached itself and disappeared behind the crest of the hog's-back.

Soon the tiny figure of a mounted man came into view on the flat beyond. Horse and rider moved rapidly across the level ground and vanished behind a knoll. When the rider reappeared he was not more than nine hundred yards distant, and galloping hard on a course paralleling the base of the hill.

"Good eye," chuckled Loudon. "Goin' to surround me. I'd sure admire to hear what he says when he finds out I ain't behind that swell."

The stranger splashed across the creek and raced toward some high ground in the rear of Loudon's old position.

Now that the enemy had headed westward there was nothing to be gained by further delay.

Loudon had plenty of courage, but one requires more than bravery and a six-shooter with which to pursue and successfully combat a gentleman armed with a Winchester.

Hastily retreating to his horse Loudon scrambled into the saddle, galloped across the hilltop and rode down the eastern slope at a speed exceedingly perilous to his horse's legs. But the yellow horse somehow contrived to keep his footing, and reached the bottom with no damage other than skinned hocks.

Once on level ground Loudon headed southward, and Lemons, that yellow bundle of nerves and steel wire, stretched out his neck and galloped with all the heart that was in him.

Loudon's destination was a line-camp twelve miles down the creek. This camp was the temporary abode of two Bar-S punchers, who were riding the country south of Fishtail Coulee. Loudon knew that both men had taken their Winchesters with them when they left the ranch, and he hoped to find one of the rifles in the dugout.

With a rifle under his leg Loudon felt that the odds would be even, in spite of the fact that the enemy had an uncanny mastery of the long firearm. Loudon's favorite weapon was the six-shooter, and he was at his best with it. A rifle in his hands was not the arm of precision it became when Johnny Ramsay squinted along the sights. For Johnny was an expert.

"Keep a-travelin', little hoss, keep a-travelin'," encouraged Loudon. "Split the breeze. That's the boy!"

Loudon had more than one reason for being anxious to join issue with the man who had attacked him. At nine hundred yards one can not recognize faces or figures, but one can distinguish the color of a horse, and Loudon's antagonist rode a sorrel. Chuck Morgan had said that Blakely's horse was a sorrel.

LOUDON sighted the dugout that was Pack-saddle line-camp in a trifle less than an hour. He saw with elation that two hobbled ponies were grazing near-by. A fresh mount would quicken the return trip. Loudon's elation collapsed like a pricked bubble when he entered the dugout and found neither of the rifles.

He swore a little, and smoked a sullen cigarette. Then he unsaddled the weary Lemons and saddled the more vicious of the two hobbled ponies. Subjugating this animal, a most excellent pitcher, worked off a deal of Loudon's ill-temper. Even so, it was in no cheerful frame of mind that he rode away to inspect the two mud-holes between Fishtail Coulee and Box Hill.

To be beaten is not a pleasant state of affairs. Not only had he been beaten, but he had been caught by the old Indian fighter's trick of the empty hat. That was what galled Loudon. To be lured into betraying his position by such an ancient snare! And he had prided himself on being an adroit fighting man! The fact that he had come within a finger's-breadth of paying with his life for his mistake did not lesson the smart, rather it aggravated it.

Late in the afternoon he returned to the line-camp. Hockling and Red Kane, the two punchers, had not yet ridden in. So Loudon sliced bacon and set the coffee on to boil. Half an hour after sunset Hockling and Kane galloped up and fell upon Loudon with joy. Neither relished the labor, insignificant as it was, of cooking.

"Company," remarked Red Kane, a forkful of bacon poised in the air.

The faraway patter of hoofs swelled to a drumming crescendo. Then inside the circle of firelight, a pony slid to a halt, and the voice of cheerful Johnny Ramsay bawled a greeting.

"That's right, Tom!" shouted the irrepressible Johnny. "Always have chuck ready for your uncle. He likes his meals hot. This is sure real gayful. I wasn't expectin' to find any folks here."

"I s'pose not," said Red Kane. "You was figurin' on romancin' in while we was away an' stockin' up on *our* grub. I know you. Hock, you better cache the extry bacon an' dobies. Don't let Johnny see 'em."

"Well, o' course," observed Ramsay superciliously, "I've got the appetite o' youth an' a feller with teeth. I don't have to get my nourishment out of soup."

"He must mean you, Hock," said Red Kane calmly. "You've done lost eight."

"The rest of 'em all hit," asserted Hockling, grinning. "But what Johnny wants with teeth, I dunno. By rights he'd ought to stick to milk. Meat ain't healthy for young ones. Ain't we got a nursin'-bottle kickin' round some'ers, Red?"

"Sure, Red owns one," drawled Loudon. "I seen him buyin' one once over to Farewell at Mike Flynn's."

"O' course," said Johnny, heaping his plate with bacon and beans. "I remember now I seen him, too. Said he was buyin' it for a friend. Why not admit yo're married, Red?"

"Ye know I bought it for Mis' Shaner o' the Three Bars!" shouted the indignant Kane. "She done asked me to get it for her. It was for her baby to drink out o'."

"Ye don't mean it," said Johnny seriously. "For a baby, ye say. Well now, if that ain't surprisin'. I always thought nursin'-bottles was to drive nails with."

In this wise the meal progressed pleasantly enough. After supper, when the four were sprawled comfortably on their saddle-blankets, Loudon launched his bombshell.

"Had a small brush this mornin'," remarked Loudon, "with a gent over by the mud-hole north o' Box Hill."

The three others sat up, gaping expectantly.

"D'ye get him?" demanded Johnny Ramsay, his blue eyes glittering in the firelight.

Loudon shook his head. He raised his left arm, revealing the rent in his shirt. Then he removed his hat and stuck his finger through the hole in the crown.

"Souvenirs," said Loudon. "He busted the lever off'n my Winchester an' gormed up the action."

"An' he got away?" queried Red Kane.

"The last I seen of him he was workin' in behind where he thought I was."

"Where was you?"

"I was watchin' him from the top o' Box Hill. What did ye think I'd be doin'? Waitin' for him to surround me an' plug me full o' holes? I come here some hurried after he crossed the creek. I was hopin' you'd have left a rifle behind."

"Wish't we had," lamented Hockling. "Say, you was lucky to pull out of it without reapin' no lead."

"I'll gamble you started the fracas, Tommy," said Johnny Ramsay.

"Not this trip. I was lookin' at some mighty interestin' cow an' pony tracks opposite the rock ledge when this gent cuts down on me an' misses by two inches."

"Tracks?"

"Yep. Some sport drove five cows on to the ledge an' chased 'em over the creek. That's how they work the trick. They throw the cows across where there's hard ground or rocks on our side. 'Course the rustlers didn't count none on us nosyin' along the opposite bank."

"Ain't they the pups?" ejaculated Hockling.

"They're wise owls," commented Johnny Ramsay. "Say, Tom, did this shootin' party look anyways familiar?"

"The color of his hoss was—some," replied Loudon. "Blakely was at the ranch last night, an' his hoss was a sorrel."

"What d'I tell ye?" exclaimed Johnny Ramsay. "What d'I tell ye? That Blakely tinhorn is one bad actor."

"I ain't none sure it was him. There's herds o' sorrel cayuses."

"Sure there are, but there's only one Blakely. Oh, it was him all right."

"Whoever it was, I'm goin' to wander over onto the 88 range tomorrow, if Red or Hock'll lend me a Winchester."

"Take mine," said Hockling. "Red's throws off a little."

"She does," admitted Red Kane, "but my cartridges don't. I'll give ye a hull box."

Followed then much profane comment relative to the 88 ranch, and the crass stupidity of Mr. Saltoun.

"I see yo're packin' a Winchester," said Loudon to Johnny Ramsay, when Hockling and Red had turned in.

"Hunter's trip," explained Johnny, his eyes twinkling. "The Old Man's got his own ideas about this rustlin', so he sent me over to scamper round the 88 range an' see what I could see. I guess I'll travel with you a spell."

"Fine!" said Loudon. "Fine. I was wishin' for company. If we're jumped we'd ought to be able to give 'em a right pleasant little surprise."

Johnny Ramsay rolled a cigarette and gazed in silence at the dying fire for some minutes. Loudon, his hands clasped behind his head, stared upward at the star-dusted heavens. But he saw neither the stars nor the soft blackness. He saw Kate and Blakely and thick-headed Mr. Saltoun bending over his desk, and he was wondering how it all would end.

"Say," said Johnny Ramsay suddenly, "this here holdup cut down on ye from behind a rock, didn't he?"

"Sure did," replied Loudon.

"Which side did he fire from?"

"Why, the hind side."

"I ain't tryin' to be funny. Was it the left side or the right side?"

"The right side," Loudon replied, after a moment's thought.

"Yore right side?"

"Yep."

"That would make it his left side. Did ye ever stop to think, Tom, that Blakely shoots a Colt right-handed an' a Winchester left-handed?"

Loudon swore sharply.

"Now, how did I come to forget that!" he exclaimed. "O' course he does."

"Guess Mr. Blakely's elected," said Johnny Ramsay.

"Seems likely."

EARLY next morning Loudon and Ramsay rode northward along the bank of the Pack-saddle. They visited first the boulder a quarter of a mile below the mud-hole. Here they found empty cartridge-shells, and the marks of boot-heels.

They forded the creek at the ledge above the mud-hole, where the cows had been driven across, and started westward. They were careful to ride the low ground at first, but early in the afternoon they climbed the rocky slope of Little Bear Mountain. From the top they surveyed the surrounding country. They saw the splendid stretches of the range specked here and there with dots that were cows, but they saw no riders.

They rode down the mountainside and turned into a wide draw, where pines and tamaracks grew slimly. At the head of the draw, where it sloped abruptly upward, was a brushless wood of tall cedars, and here, as they rode in among the trees, a calf bawled suddenly.

They rode toward the sound and came upon a dead cow. At the cow's side stood a lonely calf. At sight of the men the calf fled lumberingly. Ramsay unstrapped his rope and gave his horse the spur. Loudon dismounted and examined the dead cow. When Ramsay returned with the calf, Loudon was squatting on his heels, rolling a cigarette.

"There y'are," observed Loudon, waving his free hand toward the cow. "There's evidence for ye. Ears slit with the 88 mark, an' the 88 brand over the old Bar-S. Leg broke, an' a hole in her head. She ain't been dead more'n a day. What do you reckon?"

"That the 88 are —— fools. Why didn't they skin her?"

"Too lazy, I guess. That calf's branded an' earmarked all complete. Never was branded before neither."

"Sure. An' the brand's about two days old. Just look at it. Raw yet."

"Same date as its ma's. They done some slick work with a wet blanket on that cow, but the Bar-S is plain underneath. Give the cow a month, if she'd lived, an' ye'd never know but what she was born 88."

"Oh, they're slick, the pups!" exclaimed Johnny Ramsay.

"The Old Man ought to see this. When Old Salt throws his eyes on that branding I'll gamble he'll change his views some."

"Ye bet he will. Better start now."

"All right. Let's get a-goin'."

"One's enough. You go, Tommy. I'll stay an' caper around. I might run onto somethin'. Ye can't tell."

"I'd kind o' like to have ye here when I get back."

"Don't worry none. From what I know o' Old Salt you an' him won't be here before tomorrow mornin'! I'll be here then."

"All right. I'll slide instanter. So-long, Johnny."

CHAPTER IV

THE SKINNED CATTLE

"THIS is a devil of a time to haul a man out o' bed," complained Mr. Saltoun, stuffing the tail of his nightshirt into his trousers. "C'mon in the office," he added grumpily.

Mr. Saltoun, while Loudon talked, never took his eyes from the puncher's face. Incredulity and anger warred in his expression.

"What do you reckon?" the owner inquired in a low tone, when Loudon fell silent.

"Why, it's plain enough," said Loudon, impatiently. "The rustlers were night-drivin' them cows when one of 'em busted her leg. So they shot her, an' the calf got away an' come back after the rustlers had gone on. They must 'a' been night-drivin' 'cause if it had been daytime they'd 'a' rounded up the calf. Night-drivin' shows they were in a hurry to put a heap o' range between themselves an' the Bar-S. They were headin' straight for the Fallin' Horse an' the Three Sisters."

"I see all that. I'm still askin' what do you reckon?"

"Meanin'?"

"Who-all's doin' it?"

"I ain't changed my opinion any. If the rustlers don't ride for the 88, then they're related mighty close."

"You can't prove it," denied Mr. Saltoun.

"I know I can't. But it stands to reason that two or three rustlers workin' for themselves wouldn't drift cows west—right across the 88 range. They'd drift 'em north toward Farewell, or south toward the Fryin' Pans. Findin' that cow an' calf on the 88 range is pretty near as strong as findin' a man ridin' off on yore hoss."

"Pretty near ain't quite."

"I ain't sayin' anythin' more."

"You've got a grudge against the 88, Tom. Just because a left-handed sport on a sorrel cuts down on ye it don't follow that Blakely is the sport. Ye hadn't ought to think so, Tom. Why, Blakely stayed here the night before ye started for Pack-saddle. He didn't leave till eight o'clock in the mornin', an' then he headed for the 88. It ain't likely he'd slope over to the creek an' shoot you up. Why, that's plum foolish, Tom. Blakely's white, an' he's a friend o' mine."

Mr. Saltoun gazed distressedly at Loudon. The puncher stared straight before him, his expression wooden. He had said all that he intended to say.

"Well, Tom," continued the owner, "I don't enjoy losin' cows any more than the next feller. We've got to stop this rustlin' somehow. In the mornin' I'll ride over with ye an' have a look at that cow. Tell Chuck Morgan I want him to come along. Now you get some sleep, an' forget about the 88. They ain't in on this deal, take my word for it."

It was a silent trio that departed in the yellow light of the new day. Chuck Morgan endeavored to draw Loudon into conversation but gave it up after the first attempt. The heavy silence remained unbroken till they reached the mouth of the wide draw beyond Little Bear Mountain.

"There's a hoss," said Loudon suddenly.

A quarter of a mile away grazed a saddled pony. Loudon galloped forward.

The animal made no attempt to escape. It stood quietly while Loudon rode up and gathered in the reins dragging between its feet. The full *cantinas* were in place. The quirt hung on the horn. The rope had not been unstrapped. The slicker was tied behind the cantle. Under the right fender the Winchester was in its scabbard. All on the saddle was as it should be.

"Who's hoss?" inquired Mr. Saltoun, who had followed more slowly.

"Ramsay's," replied the laconic Loudon, and started up the draw at a lope, leading the riderless pony.

Loudon's eyes searched the ground ahead and on both sides. He instinctively felt that some ill had befallen Johnny Ramsay. His intuition was not at fault.

When the three had ridden nearly to the head of the draw, where the trees grew thickly, Loudon saw, at the base of a leaning pine, the crumpled body of Johnny Ramsay.

Loudon dropped from the saddle and ran to his friend. Ramsay lay on his back, his left arm across his chest, his right arm extended, fingers gripping the butt of his six-shooter. His face and neck and left arm were red with blood. His appearance was sufficiently ghastly and death-like, but his flesh was warm.

Respiration was imperceptible, however, and Loudon tore open Ramsay's shirt and pressed his ear above the heart. It was beating, but the beat was pitifully slow and faint.

Loudon set to work. Chuck Morgan was despatched to find water, and Mr. Saltoun found himself taking and obeying orders from one of his own cowpunchers.

An hour later Ramsay, his wounds washed and bandaged, began to mutter, but his words were unintelligible. Within half an hour he was raving in delirium. Chuck Morgan had departed, bound for the Bar-S, and Loudon and Mr. Saltoun sat back on their heels and watched their moaning patient.

"It's a whipsaw whether he'll pull through or not," remarked the bromidic Mr. Saltoun.

"He's got to pull through," declared Loudon grimly. "He ain't goin' to die. Don't think it for a minute."

"I dunno. He's got three holes in him."

"Two. Neck an' arm, an' the bone ain't touched. That graze on the head ain't nothin'. It looks bad, but it only scraped the skin. His neck's the worst. A half inch over an' he'd 'a' bled to death. Ye can't rub out Johnny so easy. There's a heap o' life in him."

"His heart's goin' better now," said Mr. Saltoun.

Loudon nodded, his gray eyes fixed on the bandaged head of his friend. Conversation languished, and Mr. Saltoun began to roll and smoke cigarettes. After a time Loudon rose.

"He'll do till the wagon comes," he said. "Let's go over an' take a squint at that cow."

Loudon led Mr. Saltoun to the spot where lay the dead cow. When the puncher came in sight of the dead animal he halted abruptly and observed that he would be ——.

Mr. Saltoun whistled. The cow had been thoroughly skinned. Beside the cow lay the calf, shot through the head. And from the little body every vestige of hide had been stripped.

"I guess that settles the cat-hop," said Mr. Saltoun, and began to comprehensively curse all rustlers and their works.

It was not the skinning that disturbed Mr. Saltoun. It was the sight of his defunct property. The fact that he was losing cows had struck home at last. Inform a man that he is losing property, and he may or may not become concerned, but show him that same property rendered valueless, and he will become very much concerned. Ocular proof is a wonderful galvanizer. Yet, in the case of Mr. Saltoun, it was not quite wonderful enough.

"Oh, they're slick!" exclaimed Loudon bitterly. "They don't forget nothin'! No wonder Blakely's a manager!"

Mr. Saltoun ceased swearing abruptly.

"Yo're wrong, Tom," he reproved. "The 88's got nothin' to do with it. I know they ain't, an' that's enough. I'm the loser, not you, an' I'm the one to do the howlin'. An' I don't want to hear any more about the 88 or Blakely."

Loudon turned his back on Mr. Saltoun and returned to the wounded man. The cowboy yearned to take his employer by the collar and kick him into a reasonable frame of mind. Such blindness was maddening.

Mr. Saltoun heaped fuel on the fire of Loudon's anger by remarking that the rustlers undoubtedly hailed from the Frying Pan Mountains. Loudon, writhing internally, was on the point of relieving his pent-up feelings when his eye glimpsed a horseman on the high ground above the draw. The puncher reached for his Winchester, but he laid the rifle down when the rider changed direction and came toward them.

"Block, ain't it?" inquired Mr. Saltoun.

Loudon nodded. His eyes narrowed to slits, his lips set in a straight line. The sheriff rode up and halted, his little eyes shifting from side to side. He spoke to Mr. Saltoun, nodded to Loudon, and then stared at the wounded man.

"Got a rustler, I see," he observed dryly, his lips crinkled in a sneering smile.

"Ye see wrong—as usual," said Loudon. "Some friend o' yores shot Johnny."

"Friend o' mine? Who?" queried the sheriff, his manner one of mild interest.

"Wish I knew. Thought ye might be able

to tell me. Ain't that what ye come here for?"

"Ramsav's shot—that's all we know," interposed Mr. Saltoun hastily. "An' there's a cow an' calf o' mine over yonder. Skinned, both of 'em."

"An' the cow had been branded through a wet blanket," said Loudon, not to be fobbed off. "The Bar-S was underneath an' the 88 was on top. Johnny an' me found the dead cow an' the live calf yesterday. I left Johnny here an' rode in to the Bar-S. When we got here we found Johnny shot an' the cow an' calf skinned. What do you guess?"

"I don't guess nothin'," replied the sheriff. "But it sure looks as if rustlers had been mighty busy."

"Don't it?" said Loudon with huge sarcasm. "I guess now——"

"Say, look here, sheriff," interrupted Mr. Saltoun, anxious to preserve peace, "I ain't makin' no charges against anybody. But this rustlin' has got to stop. I can't afford to lose any more cows. Do somethin'. Yo're sheriff."

"Do somethin'!" exclaimed the sheriff. "Well, I like that! What can I do? I can't be in forty places at once. Ye talk like I knowed just where the rustlers hang out."

"Ye probably do," said Loudon, eyes watchful, his right hand ready.

"Keep out of this, Tom," ordered Mr. Saltoun, turning on Loudon with sharp authority. "I'll say what's to be said."

"Show me the rustlers," said the sheriff, electing to disregard Loudon's outburst. "Show me the rustlers, an' I'll do the rest."

At which remark the seething Loudon could control himself no longer.

"You'll do the rest!" he rapped out in a harsh and grating voice. "I guess ye will! If ye was worth a —— ye'd get 'em without bein' shown! How much do they pay ye for leavin' 'em alone?"

The sheriff did not remove his hands from the saddle-horn. For Loudon had jerked out his six-shooter, and the long barrel was in line with the third button of the officer's shirt.

"Ye got the drop," grunted the sheriff, his little eyes venomous, "an' I ain't goin' up agin a sure thing."

"You can gamble ye ain't. I'd sure admire to blow ye apart. You git, an' git now."

The sheriff hesitated. Loudon's finger dragged on the trigger. Slowly the sheriff picked up his reins, wheeled his horse and loped away.

"What did ye do that for?" demanded Mr. Saltoun, disturbed and angry.

Loudon, his eye-corners puckered, stared at the owner of the Bar-S. The cowboy's gaze was curious, speculative, and it greatly lacked respect. Instead of replying to Mr. Saltoun's question, Loudon sheathed his six-shooter, squatted down on his heels and began to roll a cigarette.

"I asked ye what ye did that for?" reiterated blundering Mr. Saltoun.

Again Loudon favored his employer with that curious and speculative stare.

"I'll tell ye," Loudon said gently. "I talked to Block because it's about time some one did. He's in with the rustlers—Blakely an' that bunch. If you wasn't blinder'n a flock of bats you'd see it, too."

"You can't talk to me this way!" cried the furious Mr. Saltoun.

"I'm doin' it," observed Loudon placidly.

"Yo're fired!"

"Not by a jugful I ain't. I quit ten minutes ago."

"You—" began Mr. Saltoun.

"Don't," advised Loudon, his lips parting in a mirthless smile.

Mr. Saltoun didn't. He withdrew to a little distance and sat down. After a time he took out his pocket-knife and began to play mumblety-peg. Mr. Saltoun's emotions had been violently churned. He required time to readjust himself. But with his customary stubbornness he held to the belief that Blakely and the 88 were innocent of evil-doing.

Until Chuck Morgan and the wagon arrived early in the morning, Loudon and his former employer did not exchange a word.

CHAPTER V

THEIR OWN DECEIVINGS

JOHNNY RAMSAY was put to bed in the Bar-S ranch-house. Kate Saltoun promptly installed herself as nurse. Loudon, paid off by the now regretful Mr. Saltoun, took six hours' sleep and then rode away on Ranger to notify the Cross-in-a-box of Ramsay's wounding.

An angry man was Richie, manager of the Cross-in-a-box, when he heard what Loudon had to say.

The following day Loudon and Richie rode to the Bar-S. On Loudon's mentioning that he was riding no longer for the Bar-S, Richie immediately hired him. He knew a good man, did Jack Richie of the Cross-in-a-box.

When they arrived at the Bar-S they found Johnny Ramsay conscious, but very weak. His weakness was not surprising. He had lost a great deal of blood. He grinned wanly at Loudon and Richie.

"You mustn't stay long," announced Miss Saltoun firmly, smoothing the bed-covering.

"We won't, ma'am," said Richie. "Who shot ye, Johnny?"

"I dunno," replied the patient. "I was just a-climbin' aboard my hoss, when I heard a shot behind me an' I felt a pain in my neck. I pulled my six-shooter an' whirled, an' I got in one shot at a gent on a hoss. He fired before I did, an' it seems to me there was another shot off to the left. Anyway the lead got me on the side of the head an' that's all I know."

"Who was the gent on the hoss?" Loudon asked.

"I dunno, Tom. I hadn't more'n whirled when he fired, an' the smoke hid his face. It all come so quick. I fired blind. Ye see the chunk in my neck kind o' dizzied me, an' that rap on the head comin' on top of it, why, I wouldn't 'a' knowed my own brother ten feet away. I'm all right now. In a couple o' weeks I'll be ridin' the range again."

"Sure ye will," said Loudon. "An' the sooner the quicker. You've got a good nurse."

"I sure have," smiled Johnny, gazing with adoring eyes at Kate Saltoun.

"That will be about all," remarked Miss Saltoun. "He's talked enough for one day. Get out now, the both of you, and don't fall over anything and make a noise. I'm not going to have my patient disturbed."

Loudon went down to the bunk-house for his dinner. After the meal, while waiting for Richie, who was lingering with Mr. Saltoun, he strove to obtain a word with Kate. But she informed him that she could not leave her patient.

"See you later," said Miss Saltoun. "You mustn't bother me now."

And she shooed him out and closed the door. Loudon returned to the bunk-house and sat down on the bench near the kitchen. Soon Jimmy appeared with a pan of potatoes and waxed loquacious as was his habit.

"Who plugged Johnny? That's what I'd like to know," wondered Jimmy. "Here! leave them Hogans be! They're to eat, not to jerk at the windmill. I never seen such a kid as you. Yo're worse than Chuck Morgan, an' he's just a natural-born fool. Oh, all right. I ain't a-goin' to talk to ye if ye can't act decent."

Jimmy picked up his pan of potatoes and withdrew with dignity. The grin faded from Loudon's mouth, and he gazed worriedly at the ground between his feet.

What would Kate say to him? Would she be willing to wait? She had certainly encouraged him, but— Premonitory and unpleasant shivers crawled up and down Loudon's spinal column. Proposing was a strange and novel business with him. He had never done such a thing before. He felt as one feels who is about to step forth into the unknown. For he was earnestly and honestly very much in love. It is only your philanderer who enters upon a proposal with cold judgment and a calm heart.

HALF an hour later Loudon saw Kate at the kitchen window. He was up in an instant and hurrying toward the kitchen door. Kate was busy at the stove when he entered. Over her shoulder she flung him a charming smile, stirred the contents of a saucepan a moment longer, then clicked on the cover and faced him.

"Kate," said Loudon, "I'm quittin' the Bar-S."

"Quitting? Oh, why?" Miss Saltoun's tone was sweetly regretful.

"Lot o' reasons. I'm ridin' for the Cross-in-a-box now."

He took a step forward and seized her hand. It lay in his, limp, unresponsive. Of which lack of sympathetic warmth he was too absorbed to be conscious.

"Kate," he pursued, "I ain't got nothin' now but my forty a month. But I sure love ye a lot. Will ye wait for me till I make enough for the two of us? Look at me, Kate. I won't always be a punch. I'll make money, an' if I know yo're a-waitin' for me, I'll make it all the faster."

According to recognized precedent Kate should have fallen into his arms. But she did nothing of the kind. She disengaged her fingers and drew back a step, ingenuous surprise written large on her countenance. Pure art, of course, and she did it remarkably well.

"Why, Tom," she breathed, "I wasn't expecting this. I didn't dream, I——"

"That's all right," Loudon broke in. "I'm tellin' ye I love ye, honey. Will ye wait for me? Ye don't have to say ye love me. I'll take a chance on yore lovin' me later. Just say ye'll wait, will ye, honey?"

"Oh, Tom, I can't!"

"Ye can't! Why not? Don't love anybody else, do ye?"

"Oh, I can't, Tom," evaded Kate. "I don't think I could ever love you. I like you—oh, a great deal. You're a dear boy, Tommy, but—you can't make yourself love any one."

"Ye won't have to make yoreself. I'll make ye love me. Just give me a chance, honey. That's all I want. I'd be good to ye, Kate, an' I'd spend my time tryin' to make ye happy. We'd get along. I know we would. Say yes. Give me a chance."

Kate returned to the table and leaned against it, arms at her sides, her hands gripping the table-edge. It was a pose calculated to display her figure to advantage. She had practised it frequently. Kate Saltoun was running true to form.

"Tom," she said, her voice low and appealing, "Tom, I never had any idea you loved me. And I'm awfully sorry I can't love you. Truly, I am. But we can be friends, can't we?"

"Friends! Friends!" The words were like a curse.

"Why not?"

Loudon, head lowered, looked at her under his eyebrows.

"Then it all didn't mean nothin'?" He spoke with an effort.

"All? All what? What do you mean?"

"Ye know what I mean. You've been awful nice to me. Ye always acted like ye enjoyed havin' me around. An' I thought ye liked me—a little. An' it didn't mean nothin' 'cept we can be friends. Friends!"

Again the word sounded like a curse. Loudon turned his head and stared unseeingly out of the window. He raised his hand and pushed his hair back from his forehead. A great misery was in his heart. Kate, for once in her life swayed by honest impulse, stepped forward and laid a hand on his arm.

"Don't take it so hard, Tom," she begged.

Loudon's eyes slid 'round and gazed down into her face. Kate was a remarkably handsome girl, but she had never appeared so alluring as she did at that moment.

Loudon stared at the vivid dark eyes, the parted lips, and the tilted chin. Her warm breath fanned his neck. The moment was tense, fraught with possibilities, and—Kate smiled. Even a bloodless cucumber would have been provoked. And Loudon was far from being a cucumber.

His long arms swept out and about her body, and he crushed her gasping against his chest. Once, twice, three times he kissed her mouth, then, his grasp relaxing, she wrenched herself free and staggered back against the table. Panting, hands clenched at her throat, she faced him. Loudon stood swaying, his great frame trembling.

"Kate! oh, Kate!" he cried, and stretched out his arms.

But Kate groped her dazed way around the table. Physically and mentally, she had been severely shocked. To meet a tornado where one had expected a Summer breeze is rather shattering to one's poise. Quite so. Kate suffered. Then, out of the chaos of her emotions, erupted wild anger.

"You! You!" she hissed. "How dare you kiss me! Ugh-h! I could kill you!"

She drew the back of her hand across her mouth and snapped her hand downward with precisely the same snap and jerk that a Mexican bartender employs when he flips the pulque from his fingers.

"Do you know I'm engaged to Sam Blakely? What do you think he'll do when he finds this out? Do you understand? I'm going to marry Sam Blakely!"

This facer cooled Loudon as nothing else could have done. Outwardly, at least, he became calm.

"I didn't understand, but I do now," he said, stooping to recover his hat. "If you'd told me that in the first place it would have saved trouble."

"You'd have been afraid to kiss me then!" she taunted.

"Not afraid," he corrected gently. "I wouldn't 'a' wanted to. I ain't kissin' another man's girl."

"No, I guess not! The nerve of you! Think I'd marry an ignorant puncher!"

"Ye sure ain't goin' to marry this one, but ye are goin' to marry a cow-thief!"

"A—a what?"

"A cow-thief, a rustler, a sport who ain't particular whose cows he brands."

"You lie!"

"Ye'll find out in time I'm tellin' the truth. I guess now I know more about Sam Blakely than you do, an' I tell ye he's a rustler."

"Kate! Oh, Kate!" called a voice outside.

Kate sped through the doorway. Loudon, his lips set in a straight line, followed her quickly. There, not five yards from the kitchen door, Sam Blakely sat his horse. The eyes of the 88 manager went from Kate to Loudon and back to Kate.

"What's the excitement?" inquired Blakely easily.

Kate leveled her forefinger at Loudon.

"He says," she gulped, "he says you're a rustler."

Blakely's hand swept downward. His six-shooter had barely cleared the edge of the holster when Loudon's gun flashed from the hip, and Blakely's weapon spun through the air and fell ten feet distant.

With a grunt of pain, Blakely, using his left hand, whipped a derringer from under his vest.

Again Loudon fired.

Blakely reeled, the derringer spat harmlessly upward, and then Blakely, as his frightened horse reared and plunged, pitched backward out of the saddle and dropped heavily to the ground. Immediately the horse ran away.

Kate, with a sharp cry, flung herself at the prostrate Blakely.

"You've killed him!" she wailed. "Sam—Sam—speak to me!"

But Sam was past speech. He had struck headfirst, and was consequently senseless.

Come running then Jimmy from the bunk-house, Chuck Morgan from the corrals, Mr. Saltoun and Richie from the office.

"He's dead! He's dead!" was the burden of Kate's shrill cries.

"Let's see if he is," said the practical Richie, dropping on his knees at Blakely's side. "He didn't tumble like a dead man. Just a shake, ma'am, while I look at him. I can't see nothin' with you a-layin' all over him this-a-way. Yo're gettin' all over blood, too. There now! She's done fainted. That's right, Salt. You take care of her."

The capable Richie made a rapid examination. He looked up, hands on knees, his white teeth gleaming under his brown mustache.

"He's all right," he said cheerfully. "Heart's a-tickin' like a 'larm-clock. Hole in his shoulder. Missed the bones. Bullet went right on through."

At this juncture Kate recovered consciousness and struggled upright in her father's arms.

"He shot first!" she cried, pointing at Loudon. "He didn't give him a chance!"

"You'll excuse me, ma'am," said Richie, his tone good humored, but his eyes narrowing ever so slightly. "You'll excuse me for contradictin' ye, but I happened to be lookin' through the office-window an' I seen the whole thing. Sam went after his gun before Tom made a move."

Blakely moved feebly, groaned, and opened his eyes. His gaze fell on Loudon, and his eyes turned venomous.

"You got me," he gritted, his lips drawn back, "but I'll get you when Marvin and Rudd ride in. They've got the proof with 'em, you rustler!"

After which cryptic utterance Blakely closed his mouth tightly and contented himself with glaring. Richie the unconcerned rose to his feet and dusted his knees.

"Take his legs, Chuck," directed Richie. "Gimme a hand, will ye, Jimmy. Easy now. That's it. Where'll we put him, Salt?"

Mr. Saltoun and his now sobbing daughter followed them into the ranch-house. Loudon remained where he was. When the others had disappeared Loudon clicked out the cylinder of his six-shooter, ejected the two spent shells and slipped in fresh cartridges.

"When Marvin an' Rudd ride in," he wondered. "Got the proof with 'em too, huh. It sure looks as if Blakely was goin' to a lot o' trouble on my account."

Loudon walked swiftly behind the bunk-house and passed on to the corrals. From the top of the corral-fence he intended watching for the coming of Marvin and Rudd. In this business he was somewhat delayed by the discovery of Blakely's horse whickering at the gate of the corral.

"I ain't got nothin' against you," said Loudon, "but ye sure have queer taste in owners."

Forthwith he stripped off saddle and bridle and turned the animal into the corral.

As he closed the gate his glance fell on the dropped saddle. The coiled rope had fallen away from the horn, and there was revealed in the swell-fork a neat round hole. He squatted down more closely at the neat hole.

"That happened lately," he said, fingering the edges of the hole. "I thought so," he added, as an inserted little finger encountered a smooth, slightly concave surface.

He took out his knife and dug industriously. After three minutes' work a somewhat mushroomed forty-five-caliber bullet lay in the palm of his hand.

"O' course Johnny Ramsay ain't the only sport packin' a forty-five," he said softly. "But Johnny did mention firin' one shot at a party on a hoss. It's possible he hit the swell-fork. Yep, it's a heap possible."

Then Loudon dropped the bullet into a pocket of his chaps and climbed to the top of the corral fence.

A MILE distant, on the slope of a swell, two men were riding toward the ranch-house. The horsemen were driving before them a cow and a calf. Loudon climbed down and took position behind the mule corral. From this vantage-point he could observe unseen all that might develop.

The riders, Marvin, the 88 range boss, and Rudd, a puncher, passed within forty feet of the mule corral. The cow and the calf walked heavily, as if they had been driven a long distance, and Loudon perceived that they had been newly branded 8×8. The brand was not one that he recognized.

"Crossed dumb-bell or eight times eight," he grinned. "Take yo're choice. I wonder if that brand's the proof Blakely was talkin' about. Marvin an' Rudd sure do look serious."

He cautiously edged round the corral and halted behind the corner of the bunk-house. Marvin and Rudd were holding the cow and calf near the ranch-house door. The two men lounged in their saddles. Marvin rolled a cigarette. Then in the doorway appeared Mr. Saltoun.

"Howdy, Mr. Saltoun," said Marvin. "Sam got in yet?"

"He's in there," replied Mr. Saltoun, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. "He's shot."

"Who done it?"

"Tom Loudon."

"Where is he?"

"Throw up yore hands!" rapped out the gentleman in question.

Loudon had approached unobserved and was standing some twenty feet in the rear of Marvin and Rudd. At Loudon's sharp command Rudd's hands shot skyward instantly.

"I'm waitin'," cautioned Loudon.

Marvin's fingers slowly uncoiled from the butt of his six-shooter and draggingly he followed his comrade's example.

"Now we can all be happy," remarked Loudon, nodding amiably to the perturbed Mr. Saltoun. "I won't shoot unless they shove me. They can talk just as comfortable with their hands up, an' it'll be a lot safer all 'round. Was the state o' Sam's health all ye wanted to know, Marvin? No, don't either of ye turn 'round. Just keep yore eyes clamped on the windmill. About Sam, now, Marvin. Richie says he'll pull through. Anythin' else."

"You bet there is!" exploded the furious range-boss. "You —— rustler, you branded a cow an' a calf o' ours yest'day!"

"Sure," agreed Loudon politely, "an' I held up the Farewell stage, stole thirty-eight horses, an' robbed the Maryville bank the day before. Ye don't want to forget all them little details, Marvin. It's a sure sign yo're gettin' aged when ye do. Well, well, a cow an' a calf ye say. Only the two, huh? It don't look natural somehow. I never brand less'n twenty-four at a clip."

Over the shoulders of the agitated Mr. Saltoun peered the faces of avidly interested Richie, Chuck Morgan, and Jimmy the cook. None of these three allowed a sign of his true feeling to appear on his face.

The two 88 men were red with shame and anger. Their lips moved with wicked words. Arms stretched heavenward, their gaze religiously fixed on the windmill, they presented a ridiculous appearance, and they knew it. Loudon, the dominant figure in the scene, spread his legs and smiled sardonically.

"Go on, Marvin," he said, after a moment, "yo're cussin' a lot, but ye ain't sayin' nothin'. Let's hear the rest o' that interestin' story o' the 88 cow an' her little daughter."

"You branded the both of 'em," stubbornly reiterated Marvin. "We seen ye—Sam, Rudd here, an' me, we seen ye."

"Ye seen me!" exclaimed Loudon. "Ye seen me! You was close enough to see me, an' ye didn't try to stop me! Well, you sure are the poorest liar in the territory."

"If I had my hands down ye wouldn't call me that!"

"If ye had yore hands down ye'd be dead. I'm tryin' to save yore life. C'mon, speak the rest o' yore little piece. Ye got as far as the brandin'. When did it all happen?"

"Gents," said Marvin, "this sport is a rustler. There ain't no two ways about it. Day before yest'day, just before sundown, over near the Sink, the three of us seen Loudon workin' round a hog-tied cow an' calf. We was three, maybe four miles away. We seen him through field-glasses. We hit the ground for the Sink, but when we got there all we found was the cow an' calf, branded as ye see 'em now. Loudon had sloped."

"Near the Sink," observed Loudon. "In the middle of it?"

"I've quit talkin'," replied Marvin.

Richie stepped past Mr. Saltoun and stood in front of Marvin and Rudd.

"You've done made a right serious charge agin one o' my men," remarked Richie, addressing Marvin. "If he did brand them cattle, he'll be stretched. But it ain't all clear to me yet. This here Crossed Dumb-bell brand now—see it on any other cattle besides these two, Marvin?"

"No," said Marvin, shaking his head.

"Well," continued Richie, "why didn't ye come here right off instead o' waitin' two days?"

"We was busy."

"Didn't go back to the 88 ranch-house before comin' here, did ye?"

"No."

"Or stop at any o' yore line-camps?"

"No, we didn't. We come here soon as we could make it."

"What part o' the Sink was Loudon workin' in?"

"The north side."

"Near the edge, o' course?"

"No, he was nearer the middle."

"Nearer the middle, was he? An' ye seen him at a distance o' three or four miles. Ye must have good eyesight, because if you seen Loudon workin' in the middle o' the Sink an' you was standin' where ye say ye was, ye looked through about two miles an' a half o' solid earth. The middle o' the Sink is two hundred feet below the level o' the surrounding country, an' there ain't no high land anywhere near it. Unless yo're standin' right on the edge ye can't see nothin' in the bottom, an' the Sink is only about a mile from rim to rim. I guess now yo're mistaken, Marvin."

"I ain't none sure he was plumb in the middle," grudgingly admitted Marvin. "Maybe he was kind o' near the north rim. But what's the difference?" he added brazenly. "We seen him."

"Where are the field-glasses?" astutely questioned Richie.

"Left 'em at our Lazy River line-camp," promptly replied Marvin.

"Now ain't that funny, Marvin. Ye told me not three minutes ago ye didn't stop at any o' yore line-camps."

"I mean we — I gave 'em to Shorty Simms. He's at the Lazy River line-camp, an' he took 'em there."

"Why did ye give 'em to Shorty?" persisted Richie.

"Look here, Richie!" blazed Marvin, "this ain't no court, an' I don't have to answer yore questions."

"Ye'll have to answer plenty of questions," retorted Richie, "before I'll see Loudon stretched."

"I tell ye he's a rustler!" shouted the mulish Marvin. "He's startin' a herd o' his own, an' he's usin' the Dumb-bell brand. We seen him brandin' that stock! That's enough for you or any one else to know, an' I tell ye flat the 88 is out to stretch Tom Loudon the first chance it gets!"

"Well, o' course, you know best," said Richie, "but I wouldn't do nothin' rash, Marvin. I just wouldn't go off at half-cock if I were you."

"No," chipped in Loudon briskly, "I wouldn't set my heart on it, Marvin, old hoss. I ain't countin' none on dyin' yet awhile. I've got a heap o' little matters to attend to before I cash, an' ye can see how hangin' me would disarrange all my plans. Take yore decorated cow an' calf now an' pull yore freight, an' *don't* look back."

When Marvin and Rudd were gone Richie hooked his thumb in his belt and looked with twinkling eyes at Loudon and the men in the doorway.

"I guess that settles the cat-hop," said Jack Richie.

CHAPTER VI

PESTILENT FELLOWS

BEFORE his departure Loudon visited Blakely.

"Found a bullet-hole in yore saddle," said Loudon without preliminary. "Kind o' looks as if Johnny come near bustin' yore mainspring. I ain't told Johnny — yet. Johnny bein' an impulsive sport he might ventilate ye plenty first time he met ye. Johnny's square. He ain't shootin' anybody 'less he's pretty near certain the other party is a-layin' for him, an' that bullet I dug out o' yore swell-fork sure makes it look bad for ye.

"Ye needn't look so sour. I got good news for ye. Yo're goin' to marry Kate. Well an' good. I wouldn't enjoy downin' her husband unless I'm crowded. I could 'a' killed ye a while back, an' I shot wide on purpose. Next time—but don't let there be any next time. Just you keep away from me an' Johnny. I'm leavin' the Lazy River country anyway, but I tell ye, Sam Blakely, if Johnny Ramsay is bushwhacked by the 88 I'll come back an' get ye first card out o' the box. Kate's husband or not ye'll go shoutin' home. Understand?"

"So yo're leavin' this country," bristled Blakely. "Ye'd better. I'll shoot ye on sight!"

"Sure ye feel that way about it?" queried Loudon with suspicious gentleness.

"I say what I mean as a rule. I'll shoot ye on sight, you —— rustler."

"All right. Because o' Kate I was willin' to keep paws off, but if yo're a-honin' to play the hand-out, I'll give ye every chance. You've got to get well complete first. Take three months. That ought to be time enough. Three months from today I'll ride in to Farewell. If yo're still feelin' fighty be in town when I hit it."

"I'll be there," Blakely assured him.

When Loudon had bidden Johnny Ramsay good-by, he went out and mounted Ranger and rode away with Jack Richie.

"I'm goin' away from here, Jack," said Loudon, after Richie had discussed in profane detail the 88's endeavor to discredit him.

"I thought ye was goin' to work for me," exclaimed Richie in surprise.

"I was, but somethin's happened since then. I'm kind o' sick o' the Lazy River country. I need a change."

"Well, you know best. But——"

"I know what yo're thinkin'. If I go now the 88 will think I've quit cold. Let 'em think it. I don't care. But I'll be back. I made an appointment with Blakely to meet him in Farewell three months from today."

"That's good hearin'. But I'm sure sorry you ain't goin' to ride for me."

"So'm I."

"Stay over tonight anyway. Ye ain't in any howlin' rush to get away, are ye?"

"No, I ain't so hurried. I dunno where I'll head—north, maybe."

"If yo're goin' north, why don't ye try Scotty Mackenzie? He owns the Flyin' M horse-ranch over beyond Paradise Bend. There's three or four good cow-ranches near the Bend—the Seven Lazy Seven, the Wagon-wheel, the Two Bar, an' the T. V. U."

"Maybe I will hit the Bend."

"If ye do," pursued Richie, "ye might stop an' say howdy at Cap'n Burr's. He married my sister, Burr did, an' all ye got to do is say ye know me, an' they'll give ye the house. I guess, though, ye know Cap'n Burr yoreself."

"Sure I do. It was the Cap'n who put me on to buyin' Ranger here. He kept tellin' me about this amazin' good cayuse over at the 88, an' finally I went over, liked his looks, an' bought him. The Cap'n was at the 88 the day I took the hoss away. He'd just freighted in a bunch o' stuff Blakely'd ordered. Cap'n Burr does a powerful lot o' business."

"Don't he now. Ye wouldn't think tin-pedlin' would pay so well. Oh, him an' his little old team o' blues sure glaum onto the coin."

WHEN Loudon rode into Farewell on the following day he saw half-a-dozen 88 cow-ponies hitched to the rail in front of the Palace Saloon.

"Now that's cheerful," said Loudon. "For a peaceable feller I sure do throw down with trouble a heap."

He turned aside at the hotel and tapped the landlord awake. At sight of Loudon Bill Lainey's eyes opened to their fullest extent and his red face turned purple with excitement.

"Say," huskily whispered Lainey, "Shorty Simms, Rudd, Dakota Riley, an' three more o' the 88 boys are in town. They're tankin' up down in the Palace.

Rudd's yowlin' 'round how he's goin' to drill ye. He's a heap peevish, Rudd is. I guess now ye must 'a' riled him somehow, Tom."

"I guess maybe I did, Bill. I'll take a little walk down to the Palace after I eat. Thanks for the warnin'. Feed the little hoss, will ye, Bill."

"Sure. Go on in an' holler for Lize."

While Loudon was eating, a wiry, brisk little man with a white beard entered the dining-room.

"How are ye, Cap'n?" grinned Loudon.

Cap'n Burr, surprise and embarrassment in his steel-blue eyes, advanced and gripped Loudon's hand.

"Loudon! By ——, suh!" he exclaimed. "This is indeed a pleasuh!"

The tin-pedler slid into a chair and cleared his throat several times.

"I feah, suh," he said shamefacedly, "that I have trespassed on youah prese'ves. Had I known that you were in town I would have stayed my hand."

"Why? What?" queried Loudon.

"Well, suh, I'll tell you the whole story. It's sho't. Twenty minutes ago I ente'ed the Palace Saloon. While drinking at the bah I could not help but overheah the conve'sation of half-a-dozen 88 cowboys. One of them, a man named Rudd, mentioned youah name and called you a rustlah.

"You, Tom, are my friend, and, since I was unaware that you were in town, I felt that I could not stand idly by. I info'med this Rudd person that traducing the absent was not the act of a gentleman. I also called him a —— scoundrel and a liah to boot. He took exception to my wo'ds, and I was fo'ced to shoot him.

"You unde'stand, Tom, that I acted in complete good faith. I believed you to be at the Bah-S. Otherwise, I should have repo'ted the mattah to you. Of co'se, I would have stood at youah back while you shot the rascal. His ruffianly friends ah not to be trusted."

"Don't apologize, Cap'n," said Loudon, and he reached across the table and shook hands again.

Captain Burr appeared to be greatly comforted at Loudon's ready acceptance of his explanation, and he attacked his beef and beans with appetite.

The captain was a good deal of a mystery to the folk with whom he came in contact. His mode of speech and his table manners were not those of ordinary men. But he was a man, with all that the name implies, and as such they had learned to accept him. I employ "learned" advisedly. Certain unthinking individuals had, when the captain was a comparative stranger in that region, commented upon his traits and received a prompt and thorough chastening.

Captain Burr gained thereby an enviable reputation. In reality there was no mystery attached to the old tin-pedler. He had simply been born a gentleman.

"Did Rudd die?" inquired Loudon in a tone of studied casualness, when he had finished his meal.

"He did not," replied the captain. "Unless blood-poisoning sets in he will live to be hung. My bullet broke his a'm. He rode away with his comrades five minutes lateh. No doubt he was in some pain, but the rogue was suffering much less than he dese'ved. I realize that I should have killed him, of co'se, but as I grow oldeh I find myself becoming soft-hea'ted. Time was—but one must not dwell in the past. These beans ah excellent, Tom."

"They are. Pullin' out soon?"

"At once. I'm bound no'th. I intend to visit all the ranches between heah and Pa'adise Bend. I hope to be home in two weeks. Ah you traveling my way?"

"Yep. I guess I'm bound for the Bend, too."

"Then I will ask you to deliveh a letteh to my wife. I missed the Bend stage by two houahs today, and theah is no otheh fo' three days."

Loudon took the letter and placed it carefully in the inside pocket of his vest.

While Captain Burr was harnessing his team, a job in which the tin-pedler always refused assistance, Loudon rode down the street with the intention of buying tobacco at the Blue Pigeon Store. In front of The Happy Heart Saloon, opposite the Palace Dance Hall, stood Sheriff Block and five citizens.

As Loudon rode past the sheriff made a low-voiced remark and laughed loudly. Instantly the five citizens burst into cackles. For Block, besides being sheriff, owned both the Palace and the Happy Heart. Hence most of Farewell's inhabitants took their cue from him.

The cachination in front of the Happy Heart grated on Loudon's feelings as well as his ear-drums. He knew that the sheriff, kindly soul, was holding him up to ridicule. Kate's refusal of him had made Loudon somewhat reckless. He had intended having it out with Rudd, but Captain Burr had forestalled him there. Here, however, was the sheriff of the county, another enemy. Loudon turned his horse.

Promptly the five friends oozed in various directions. Sheriff Block, a lonely figure, held his ground.

"I hear yo're lookin' for me," announced Loudon, a laughing devil in his gray eyes.

"Who told ye?" queried the sheriff, puzzled. He had expected something totally different.

"Who told me? Oh, several little birds. So o' course I want to find out about it. I wouldn't like to put ye to any trouble—such as huntin' me up, for instance."

"That's good o' ye. But I ain't lookin' for ye, not yet."

"I'm right glad to hear that. Them little birds must 'a' lied. Powerful lot o' lyin' goin' on in the world, ain't there?"

"I dunno nothin' about it," mumbled the sheriff, who was becoming more and more puzzled at the apparently aimless words of the puncher.

"Don't ye?" grinned Loudon. "That's sure hard to believe."

The sheriff warily refused to take offense, and mumbled unintelligibly.

"Forget that afternoon in the draw west o' Little Bear Mountain?" relentlessly pursued Loudon. "We had some words—remember? Ye said somethin' about me havin' the drop. I ain't got the drop now. My hands are on the horn. Yores are hooked in yore belt. But I'll lay ye two to one I bust ye plumb center before ye can pull. Take me up?"

Loudon's lips were smiling, but his eyes stared with a disconcerting gray chilliness into the small black eyes of Sheriff Block. The officer's eyelids wavered, winked, and Block shifted his gaze to Loudon's chin.

"I ain't startin' no gun-play for nothin'," said Block with finality.

Loudon held up a ten-dollar gold piece.

"Two to one," he urged.

But the sheriff perceived that the hand holding the gold piece was Loudon's left hand, and he could not quite screw his courage to the sticking-point. Block was ordinarily brave enough, but he was bad, and as a rule there is at least one individual whom the bad man fears. And Block feared Loudon.

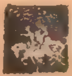
The sheriff's mean and vicious spirit writhed within him. He hated Loudon, hated him for his cocksureness, for his easy fearlessness. He would have sold his soul to the devil in return for the ability to reach for his gun. The sheriff licked his lips.

Loudon, still smiling, continued to hold aloft the gold piece. The onlookers—half of Farewell by this time—awaited the outcome in tense silence.

Suddenly the sheriff shook his shoulders, spat on the sidewalk, wheeled, and entered the Happy Heart.

Loudon flipped the gold piece into the air, caught it and returned it to his vest-pocket. Without a glance at the keenly disappointed populace, he turned Ranger and loped to the Blue Pigeon Store.

When he emerged, followed by the bawled "Good lucks!" of the proprietor, Captain Burr was waiting. The tin-pedler's face was grave, but his steel-blue eyes were twinkling with suppressed merriment.



"WELL, suh—" chuckled the Captain, when they were out of earshot of the Farewell citizens—"well, suh, you ce'tainly talked to that sheriff. Lord, Tom, it made me laugh. I didn't know that Block was so lacking in honah and spo'ting spirit. I fully expected to witness quite a ruction."

"I wasn't lookin' for a fight," disclaimed Loudon. "I knowed Block wouldn't pull. It was safe as takin' pie from a baby."

"I'm not so shuah," doubted Captain Burr. "Any reptile is mighty unce'tain. And this reptile had friends. I was watching them. My Spenceh seven-shooteh was ready fo' action. You Rob'et E. Lee hoss, pick up youah feet! Well, I'm glad it ended peacefully. My wife and daughteh, as I may have mentioned, do not approve of fighting. They can not realize how necessa'y it becomes at times. It would be well, I think, when you reach the Bend, to refrain from mentioning my little disagreement with Rudd. My family might heah of it, and—but you unde'stand, don't you, Tom?"

" 'Course I do, Cap'n," heartily offered Loudon. "I won't say a word."

"Thank you."

Captain Burr fell silent. Suddenly he began to laugh.

"Po' Farewell," he chuckled. "Theah will be some powdeh bu'nt befo' the day is out."

"How?"

"Block. His pride has had a fall. Quite a few saw the tumble. An o'dina'y man would tuck his tail between his legs and go elsewheah. But the sheriff is not an o'dina'y man. He's too mean. In order to reinstate himself in the affections of the townspeople he will feel compelled to shoot one of them. Ma'k my wo'ds, theah will be trouble in the smoke fo' Farewell."

"It can stand it. Outside o' Mike Flynn, an' Bill Lainey an' his wife, there ain't a decent two-legged party in the whole place."

Captain Burr nodded and turned an appreciative eye on Ranger.

"That chestnut hoss ce'tainly does please me," he said. "I wish I'd bought him myself. I do indeed."

CHAPTER VII

PARADISE BEND

WHERE the Dogsoldier River doubles on itself between Old Baldy Mountain and the Government Hills sprawls the little town of Paradise Bend. Larger than Farewell, it boasted of two stores, a Wells-Fargo office, two dance-halls, and five saloons. The inevitable picket-line of empty bottles and tin-cans encircled it, and its main street and three cross-streets were made unlovely by the familiar false fronts and waveringly misspelt signs.

Loudon stared at the prospect with a pessimistic eye. Solitude—he had parted with Captain Burr the previous day—and the introspection engendered thereby had rendered him gloomy. The sulky devil that had prompted him to seek a quarrel with Sheriff Block abode with him still. Sullenly he checked his horse in front of the Chicago Store.

"Mornin'," said Loudon, addressing a dilapidated ancient sitting on a cracker-box. "Can ye tell me where Cap'n Burr lives?"

"Howdy, stranger?" replied the elderly person, eying with extreme disfavor the 88 brand on Ranger's hip. "I sure can. Ride on down past the Three Card, turn to the left an' keep a-goin'. It's the last house."

Loudon nodded and continued on his way. The ancient followed him with alert eyes.

When Loudon drew abreast of the Three Card Saloon a man issued from the doorway, glimpsed Ranger's brand and immediately hastened into the street and greeted Loudon after the fashion of an old friend.

"C'mon an' licker," invited the man, as Loudon checked his horse.

"Now that's what I call meetin' ye with a brass band," remarked Loudon. "Do ye always make a stranger to home this-a-way?"

"Always," grinned the other. "I'm the reception committee."

"I'm trailin' ye," said Loudon, dismounting.

He flung the reins over Ranger's head and followed the cordial individual into the saloon. While they stood at the bar Loudon took stock of the other man.

He was a good-looking young fellow, strong-chinned straight-mouthed, with brown hair and eyes. His expression was winning, too winning, and there was a certain knowing look in his eye that did not appeal to Loudon. The latter drank his whisky slowly, his brain busily searching for the key to the other man's conduct.

"Gambler, I guess," he concluded. "I must look like ready money. Here's where one tinhorn gets fooled."

After commenting at some length on the extraordinary dryness of the season, Loudon's bottle-acquaintance, under cover of the loud-voiced conversation of three punchers at the other end of the bar, said in a low tone:

"Couldn't Sam come?"

Loudon stared. The other noted his mystification, and mistook it.

"I'm Pete O'Leary," he continued. "It's all right."

"Sure it is," conceded the puzzled Loudon. "My name's Loudon. Have another."

The knowing look in Pete O'Leary's eyes was displaced by one of distrust. He drank abstractedly, mumbled an excuse about having to see a man and departed.

Loudon bought half-a-dozen cigars, stuffed five into the pocket of his shirt, lit the sixth, and went out to his horse. Puffing strongly, he mounted and turned into the street designated by the dilapidated ancient. As he loped past the corner he glanced over his shoulder. He noted that not only was Pete O'Leary watching him from the window of a dance-hall, but that the tattered old person, leaning against a hitching-rail, was observing him also.

"I might be a hoss-thief or somethin'," muttered Loudon with a frown. "This sure is a queer village o' prairie dogs. The cigar's good anyway." Then, his horse having covered a hundred yards in the interval, he quoted, "'Couldn't Sam come?' an', 'I'm Pete O'Leary.' Sam, Sam, who's Sam? Now if Johnny Ramsay was here he'd have it all figured out in no time."

* * *

"WHY, Mr. Loudon! Oh, wait! Do wait!"

Loudon turned his head. In the doorway of a house stood a plump young woman waving a frantic dish-cloth. Ranger, hard held, slid to a halt, turned on a nickel and shot back to the beckoning young woman.

"Well, ma'am," said Loudon, removing his hat.

"Don't you remember me?" coquettishly pouted the plump lady.

Loudon remembered her perfectly. She was Mrs. Mace, wife of Jim Mace, the Wells-Fargo agent. He had met her the year before when she was visiting Kate Saltoun at the Bar-S. He had not once thought of Mrs. Mace since her departure from the ranch, and of course he had completely forgotten that she lived in Paradise Bend. If he had recalled the fact, he would have sought the Burrs' residence by some other route. One of Kate's friends was the last person on earth he cared to meet.

"Sure, I remember ye, Mrs. Mace," said Loudon gravely. "I'm right glad to see ye," he added, heavily polite.

"Are you?" said the lady somewhat sharply. "Try to look happy then. I ain't a grizzly, an' I don't bite folks. I won't stop you more'n a second."

"Why, ma'am, I am glad to see ye," protested Loudon, "an' I ain't in no hurry, honest."

"That's all right. I ain't offended. Say, how's Kate an' her pa?"

"Fine, when I saw 'em last. Kate's as pretty as ever."

"She ought to be. She ain't married. Matrimony sure does rough up a woman's figure an' face. Lord, I'm a good thirty pounds heavier than I was when I saw you last. Say, do you know if Kate got that dress pattern I sent her last month?"

"I dunno, ma'am. I didn't hear her say."

"I s'pose not. I guess you two had more important things to talk about. Say, how are you an' Kate gettin' along, anyway?"

"Why, all right, I guess."

Loudon felt extremely unhappy. Mrs. Mace's keen gaze was embarrassing. So was her next utterance.

"Well, I guess I'll write to Kate," remarked the lady, "an' find out about that dress pattern. She always was a poor writer, but she'd ought to have sent me a thank-you, anyway, an' me her best friend. I'll tell her I saw ye, Mr. Loudon."

"Don't tell her on my account," said Loudon. Then, realizing his mistake, he continued hurriedly, "Sure, tell her. She'd enjoy hearin', o' course."

"Don't tell me you two haven't been quarrelin'," chided Mrs. Mace, shaking a fat forefinger at Loudon. "You'd ought to be ashamed o' yourselves, rowin' this way."

"Why, ma'am, yo're mistaken. Me quarrel? I guess not! But I got to be goin'. Goodby, ma'am. I'll see ye again."

Loudon, raging, loped away. Meeting one of Kate's friends was bad enough in itself. For the friend to wantonly flick him on the raw was intolerable.

Loudon began to believe that women were put into the world for the purpose of annoying men. But when he had dismounted in front of the best house on the street, and the door had been opened in response to his knock, he changed his mind, for a brown-haired young girl with a very pleasant smile was looking at him inquiringly.

"Is this where Captain Burr lives?" queried Loudon.

"Yes," replied the girl, her smile broadening.

"Then here's a letter for Mis' Burr. The Cap'n asked me to bring it up for him."

"A letter for me?" exclaimed a sharp voice, and the speaker, a tall, angular, harsh-featured woman appeared at the girl's side with the suddenness of a Jack-in-the-box. "From Benjamin?" continued the harsh-featured woman, uttering her words with the rapidity of a machine-gun's fire. "How is he? When d'you see him last? When's he comin' home?"

"Heavens, ma!" laughed the girl, before Loudon could make any reply. "Give the poor man a chance to breathe."

"You got to excuse me, stranger," said Mrs. Burr. "But I'm always so worried about Benjamin when he's travelin'. He's so venturesome. But come in, stranger. Come in an' rest yore hat. Dinner's 'most ready."

"Why, thank ye, ma'am," stuttered the embarrassed Loudon. "But I guess I'll go to the hotel."

"I guess ye won't!" snapped Mrs. Burr. "I never let one o' my husband's friends 'cept Scotty Mackenzie eat at the hotel yet, an' I ain't goin' to begin now. You'll just come right inside an' tell me all about Benjamin while yo're eatin'. That your hoss? Well, the corral's behind the house. Dorothy, you go with the gentleman an' see that he don't stampede."

Loudon, brick-red beneath his tan, seized Ranger's bridle and followed Miss Burr to the corral. While he was unsaddling he looked up and caught her eying him amusedly. He grinned and she laughed outright.

"I'm glad you didn't stampede," she said, her brown eyes twinkling. "Mother would have been heart-broken if you had. Whenever any of Dad's friends are in town they never think of eating at the hotel—except Scotty Mackenzie. Scotty stubbornly refuses to dine with us. He says mother's cooking takes away his appetite for what he calls ranch grub. Mother is really a wonderful cook. You'll see."

In this manner was the ice broken, and Loudon's sullen gloom had gone from him by the time he entered the Burr kitchen. On the Turkey-red table-cloth a broiled steak, surrounded by roasted potatoes, reposed on a platter. Flanking the platter were a bowl of peas and a large dish of sliced beets adrip with butter sauce. Loudon's eyes opened wide in amazement. Never in all his life had he beheld such an appetizing array of edibles.

"Looks good, don't it?" beamed Mrs. Burr.

It was wonderful how her smile transformed her forbidding features. To Loudon she appeared as a benevolent angel. He could only nod dumbly.

"Set now, an' don't be afraid o' the victuals," continued Mrs. Burr, filling the coffee-cups. "It all has to be et, an' I sure do hate to chuck out good grub. Lord, it makes me feel fine to cook for a man again! What did you say yore name is, Mister? Loudon, o' course! I never can catch a name the first time. I always got to hear it twice. Dorothy, you reach over an' dish out them peas an' beets. Take that piece of steak next the bone, Mister Loudon. Like gravy on yore 'taters? Most do. My man does, special. Here's a spoon. Dorothy, pass the bread."

Everything tasted even better than it looked. Loudon ate a second piece of dried-apple pie, and had a fourth cup of coffee to top off with. To the puncher it had been a marvelous dinner. No wonder Scotty Mackenzie demurred at dining with the Burrs. After one such meal sowbelly and Miner's Delights would be as bootsole and buckshot.

"You can smoke right here," said Mrs. Burr, after Loudon had refused a fifth cup of coffee. "Shove yore chair back agin' the wall, hook up yore feet an' be happy while Connie an' I wash the dishes. I like to see a man comfortable, I do. So you know my brother. Well, well, ain't the world a small place? How're Jack an' the Cross-in-a-box makin' out? He never thinks to write, Jack Richie don't, the lazy rapscallion. Wait till I set eyes on him. I'll tell him a thing or two."

Loudon, in no haste to find Scotty Mackenzie, was smoking his fifth cigarette, when the dilapidated ancient of the cracker-box stuck his head in the door.

"Howdy, Mis' Burr?" said the ancient. "Howdy, Dorothy?"

"'Lo, Scotty," chorused the two women. "Let me make ye acquainted with Mr. Loudon, Scotty," continued Mrs. Burr. "Mr. Loudon, shake hands with Mr. Mackenzie."

Loudon gripped hands with the ragged ancient. In the latter's bright blue eyes was no friendliness.

He acknowledged the introduction with careful politeness, and sat down on a chair in a corner. Having deftly rolled a cigarette, he flipped the match through the doorway, tilted back his chair, remarked that the weather was powerful dry, and relapsed into silence. He took no further part in the conversation.

At the end of the kitchen, between the windows, hung a small mirror. Loudon, idly watching the two women as they moved about resetting the table, happened to glance at the mirror. In it he saw reflected the face of Scotty Mackenzie.

The features were twisted into an almost demoniac expression of hate. Slowly Loudon turned his head. Mackenzie, his eyes on the floor, was smoking, his expression one of serene well-being.

"He don't like me any," decided Loudon, and pondered the advisability of asking Mackenzie for a job.

It was not Mackenzie's lack of friendliness that gave Loudon pause. It was the man's appearance. Even for the West, where attire does not make the man, Mackenzie had not an inspiring presence. His trousers showed several patches and a rip or two. His vest was in a worse state than his trousers. His blue flannel shirt had turned green in spots, and the left sleeve had once belonged to a red flannel undershirt. Two holes yawned in the corner of his flappy-brimmed hat, and his boots, run over at the heels, would have shamed a tramp.

That this economically garbed individual could prove a good employer seemed doubtful. Yet he had been recommended by Jack Richie.

MACKENZIE suddenly mumbled that he guessed he'd better be going, and rose to his feet. Loudon followed him into the street. Mackenzie halted and half-turned as Loudon caught up with him. Loudon noted that the ancient's hand was closer to his gun-butt than politeness and the circumstances warranted.

"Hirin' any men?" inquired Loudon.

"I might," replied Mackenzie, the pupils of his blue eyes shrunk to pin-points. "Who, for instance?"

"Me for one."

Mackenzie continued to stare. Loudon, who never lowered his eyes to any man, steadily returned the ancient's gaze.

"Yo're hired," said Mackenzie suddenly. "Git yore hoss. I'll meet ye at the corner o' Main Street."

Mackenzie walked rapidly away, and Loudon returned to the house of the Burrs. He took his leave of the two engaging women, the elder of whom pressed him repeatedly to come again, and went out to the corral.

While Loudon awaited his employer's arrival at the corner of Main Street, he saw Pete O'Leary emerge from the doorway of the Three Card Saloon and walk toward him. But the young man of the knowing brown eye did not cross the street. He nodded to Loudon and swung round the corner.

The Lazy River man shifted sidewise in the saddle and followed him with his eyes. Pete O'Leary interested Loudon. Folk that are mysterious will bear watching, and O'Leary's manner during his conversation with Loudon had been perplexingly vague.

"Now I wonder where that nice-lookin' young fellah is goin'?" debated Loudon. "Burrs', for a plugged nickel! Yep, there he goes in the door. Well, Mis' Burr ain't a fool, but if I owned a good-lookin' daughter, that Pete O'Leary ain't just the right brand o' party I'd want should come a-skirmishin' round."

Loudon's mental soliloquy was cut short by the arrival of Mackenzie. The ancient's appalling disregard for his personal appearance did not extend to his mount and saddlery. His horse was a handsome bay. The saddle he sat in was a swell-fork tree, with a silver horn, silver conchas, carved leather skirts and cantle, and snowflake leather strings. The bridle was a split-ear, with a nose-band even more marvelously carved than the saddle, and it sported a blue steel bit, silver inlaid, and eighteen-inch rein-chains. The most exacting dandy in cowland could not have obtained better equipment.

Beyond a momentless sentence or two Mackenzie said nothing as he and his new hand rode out into the valley of the Dog-soldier. He maintained his silence till Loudon, muttering that his cinches required tightening, checked Ranger and dismounted.

"Throw up yore hands!" was the harsh order that fell on Loudon's astonished ears.

Hands above his head, Loudon turned slowly and stared into the muzzle of a well-kept six-shooter. Behind the gun gleamed the frosty blue eye of Scotty Mackenzie.

"Got anythin' to say before I leave ye?" inquired Mackenzie.

"That depends on how ye leave me," countered Loudon. "If yo're just aimin' to say, 'So-long,' ye can't go too quick. Yo're a mite too abrupt to suit me. But if yore intention is hostile, then I got a whole lot to say."

"Hostile it is, young feller. Trot out yore speech."

"That's handsome enough for a dog. First, I'd sure admire to know why yo're hostile."

"You know."

"I don't yet," denied Loudon.

Scotty Mackenzie stared woodenly. His features betrayed no hint of his purpose. He might have been gazing at a cow or a calf or the kitchen stove. Nevertheless Loudon realized that the amazing old man was within a whisper of pulling trigger.

"Ye see," observed Loudon, forcing his lips to smile pleasantly, "it ain't the goin' away I mind so much—it's the not knowin' why. I get off to fix cinches, an' ye throw down on me. I ain't done nothin' to ye—I ain't never seen ye before, an' I don't believe I've ever met up with any o' yore relations, so——"

"Yo're from the 88," interrupted Mackenzie. "That's enough!"

"Bein' from the 88," said Loudon, "is sure a bad recommend for any man. But it just happens I'm from the Bar-S. I never have rode for the 88, an' I don't think I ever will."

"What are ye doin' with an 88 hoss?" pursued the unrelenting Mackenzie.

"88 hoss? Why that little hoss is my hoss. I bought him from the 88."

"The brand ain't vented."

"I know it ain't. At the time I bought him I didn't expect to have to tell the story o' my life to every old bushwhacker in the territory, or I sure would 'a' had that brand vented."

The six-shooter in Mackenzie's hand remained steady. In his chill blue eye was no flicker of indecision. Loudon was still smiling, but he felt that his end was near.

"Say," said Loudon, "when you've done left me, I wish ye'd send my hoss an' saddle to Johnny Ramsay o' the Cross-in-a-box. Johnny's at the Bar-S now, got a few holes in him. But you send the hoss to Jack Richie an' tell him to keep him for Johnny till he comes back. Don't mind doin' that, do ye? Ain't aimin' to keep the cayuse, are ye?"

"Do you know Johnny Ramsay?" queried Mackenzie.

"Ought to. Johnny an' me've been friends for years."

"Know Jack Richie?"

"Know him 'most as well as I do Johnny. An' I know Cap'n Burr too. Didn't ye see me there at his house?"

"The Cap'n knows lots o' folks, an' it ain't hard to scrape acquaintance with a couple o' soft-hearted women."

"I brought up a letter from Cap'n Burr to his wife. You ask her."

"Oh, sure. Ye might 'a' carried a letter an' still be what I take ye for."

"Now we're back where we started. What do ye take me for?"

Mackenzie made no reply. Again there fell between the two men that spirit-breaking silence. It endured a full five minutes, to be broken finally by Mackenzie.

"Git aboard yore hoss," said the ranch-owner. "An' don't go after no gun."

"I'd rather draw what's comin' to me on the ground," objected Loudon. "It ain't so far to fall."

"Ain't nothin' comin' to ye yet. Git aboard, go on to the ranch, an' tell my foreman, Doubleday, I sent ye, an' that I won't be back yet awhile."

"I ain't so sure I want to work for ye—now."

"There ain't no two ways about it. You'll either give me yore word to go on to the ranch an' stay there till I come, or ye'll stay right here. After I come back ye can quit if ye like."

"That's a harp with another tune entirely. I'll go ye."

Loudon turned to his horse and swung into the saddle.

"Keep a-goin' along this trail," directed Mackenzie, his six-shooter still covering Loudon. "It's about eight mile to the ranch."

Loudon did not look back as he rode away.

TO BE CONTINUED

BUFFALO TENS

by Stephen Allen Reynolds

Author of "The Man With the D. S. O.," "A Flier in Steel," etc.

"YES, WE make all our own ink now, Dave. It saves the Government quite a few pennies; and that's what I'm here for."

Director Ray Kendall of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing patted the shining hopper of the big ink-mill nearest him and gazed with pride at the thin stream of cobalt-blue which slid down the apron and coiled itself within the waiting can.

Scott of the Secret Service, whiling away an idle hour at the Bureau with his old friend, chewed rhythmically at his unlighted cigar.

"Makes for protection, too," issued from the corner of his mouth. Dave Scott was a man of few words.

"Yes," Kendall agreed, "we make inks that can't be bought in the open market. They're pretty hard to match, as 'Gelatine' Haynes found to his cost when he got out that batch of 'Indian Fives.' "

Scott's keen brown eyes narrowed a trifle at the mention of the name of the photographer-counterfeiter he had chased halfway around the world. The Secret Service operative's first-born was nearly a year old before the chase ended at Nagasaki, and the mother had barely survived the ordeal of giving birth to David, Jr.

"A shade too light; the Indian's head muddy," he went on to comment; "but Haynes worked off a big bundle of it before he slipped away on the Shinyo Maru."

"And now he's where the rats won't bite him for the next few years," Kendall chuckled. "Thanks to you."

Scott, as modest as he was clever and untiring, abruptly changed the subject.

"Gets dark mighty early these days," he said as he turned to a window facing the main building of the big money factory.

"Tomorrow's the twenty-third, the shortest day of the——"

The Director's final word was drowned by a sullen *boom!* that rattled the window-panes of the ink-mill and left the speaker with his mouth open. Simultaneously a row of windows on one of the upper floors of the brick structure across the yard became black. There was trouble of some sort on the plate-press floor—the big floor devoted exclusively to the printing of currency.

"That's no short circuit!" snapped Kendall as he sprang toward the head of the stairs.

"No. Sounds more like powder—or worse!" said the Secret Service man, close at the Director's heels.

The single flight of stairs descended, the two men dashed across the thin layer of snow which carpeted the asphalt of the yard, and entered the main building.

"Press floor—in a hurry!" Kendall bade the wondering elevator man.

As the car shot upward a variety of sounds were borne down the shaft. Shrieks and screams from the women press-feeders, orders bawled out in deeper voices, were evidence that something unusual had happened.

As the elevator slowed for the stop, Kendall issued brief instructions to the operator.

"Find the electrician at once," he said, "and tell him I want lights on the press floor as quickly as possible."

Through the jam at the elevator door, Kendall and Scott worked their way.

"It's all right, girls," the Director called continually in his deep bass voice. "Don't push and shove. We'll have lights here in a minute or two."

Here and there a match flickered, accentuating the blackness of the big room, for not an incandescent bulb was blowing. Kendall swore softly as he bumped into the extended bed of a press, then he gave a grunt of satisfaction as the Secret Service man drew a pocket flash-light and pressed the button.

"I smell dynamite," said Scott as he led the way down the center alley toward the foreman's raised platform.

True! Sniffing the air, the Director sensed an acrid odor stronger than that of ink and damp paper—an odor that reminded him vaguely of a visit he had once paid to a mine soon after a series of "shots" had been fired.

"What the devil's happened?" he asked himself.

Comparative quietness prevailed.

"This way, Kendall," Scott prompted as they passed the empty platform.

He headed for a distant corner of the room where, behind a low partition, a bright light was now flaring and casting grotesque shadows on the ceiling.

It was the men's washroom thus illuminated; a narrow, sink-lined space separated from the main room by an eight-foot screen of matched and planed boards. Here, holding a sheet of metal which bore a flaring impromptu torch in the shape of an oil-saturated ball of waste, Kendall found the foreman examining a tangle of wires.

A litter of broken glass was strewn over the cement floor—fragments of terra-cotta, pieces of porcelain, bits of hard rubber. The switchboard, which controlled the lights on the plate-press floor, had been blown almost bodily from its position over one end of the long sink. Pressing closely around the foreman was a knot of men, their naked arms and faces smeared with green and orange-colored inks. Careless of staining his clothing, the Director shouldered his way to the foreman's side, followed closely by Scott.

"What do you make of it, Fleming?"

The foreman looked around at the words of his chief, then shook his head.

"Only the devil himself knows," he went on to say. "I just checked off the plates of the day gang, turned 'em over to the night shift, and was thinkin' about going home. Then came the explosion. I thought the side o' the buildin' had caved in. Everything was black. I——"

"Kendall," broke in Scott abruptly, "see this."

THE DIRECTOR looked at the fragment of tough, greasy paper which the Secret Service man held in his hand, an object he had picked up from the litter on the floor.

"It's a bit of casing from a tube of dynamite," Scott went on. "A piece about an inch long. Just enough, and not too much, was used."

Drawing closer to the Bureau Chief, the man-hunter added in a tone barely audible to the former's ear:

"Somebody wanted confusion and darkness. Look to your plates and currency—if it isn't too late."

Kendall was quick to act on the suggestion. Seizing Scott's pocket light and calling for the foreman to follow him he made his way to the raised platform and picked up the telephone receiver.

A few brief questions to the chief watchman, and the Director felt satisfied that since the departure of the day force no person had left the building.

"So far, so good!" Kendall snapped into the transmitter. "And until I give you further orders, don't let a soul out of the building—not even a rat."

A flood of light illuminated the room as the Director turned from the telephone. The electrician had spliced in a temporary connection.

"Every man and girl to their places," Kendall ordered as Foreman Fleming and his night assistant approached.

Wonderingly the employees obeyed, and ranged themselves alongside their plate-presses. Up one alley, and down another, the foreman strode, followed by the Director. Half the room had been covered, when came a cry from the northern side.

"My plate—it's gone!"

Kendall's jaw dropped at the words. Keyed up to expect something unusual, he had hoped that the plot concerned at most the theft of a batch of completed currency. The loss of a plate—particularly if it were a face-plate—was a serious matter indeed. In the history of the Bureau there had been but one instance where a pair of plates had been smuggled out of the big plant, to be seized by Secret Service operatives before damage had been done.

The Director turned toward the man who had announced his loss, but scarcely had he taken a step in his direction before another voice came from the northern alley.

"My plate's gone, too!"

The speaker was at a press adjoining that of the first complainant, at a point not far distant from the entrance of the washroom, and between two windows which in daylight commanded a view of the Monument Grounds.

Even as Kendall bent his steps toward the north alley, he noticed that the bottom sash of one of the windows was partly raised, and that the Secret Service man was standing before it, gazing with seeming carelessness in the direction of the dim cluster of lights near the base of the Monument.

"What plate were you working with, Poor?" Kendall asked the man who had spoken first.

Joe Poor, a lean, timid man with eyes of washed-out blue, tugged at his wheat-colored mustache as he answered—

" 'Buffalo Ten' face-plate, number 3761."

"And yours?" The Director wheeled upon the other plate-printer.

" 'Buffalo Ten' back, number 480."

"A complete set of plates gone!" groaned the foreman at Kendall's elbow.

The Bureau chief glanced at Scott. Almost helpless in the face of the catastrophe that threatened his hitherto clean record, he looked to the Secret Service man for his cue. Nor did Dave Scott fail him.

"When did you last see your plate?" he asked Poor sharply.

"At the moment of the explosion. I'd made six impressions since I came on, and was inkin' up for the seventh. *Bang!* goes something in the washroom, and the lights popped out. My feeder and I beat it for the opposite side o' the room. Then, when the lights were turned on again, I came back here and missed the plate."

Scott chewed furiously at his unlighted cigar, appraised his man with a shrewd glance that swept him from head to foot, then put a single question to him.

"Had you chalked your hands and polished the plate after inking it."

The Director squirmed as his friend put the seemingly idle question, but he knew Scott too well to offer protest.

"No," Poor answered. "The plate was rough-inked—hadn't even been wiped."

"And when did you miss *your* plate?" Scott turned to the second man, a well-built fellow with a green shade over his eyes.

"When the lights were turned up, sir—as soon as I got back to my press."

"And when did you see it last?"

"About the time of the explosion."

"Was it inked?" Scott glanced sharply at the clean hands and arms of the printer.

"No, sir. Kitty, my feeder here"—the speaker indicated a freckled young woman at his side—"didn't have the paper damp enough to suit me. I was waiting on her before starting in for the night."

Abruptly, the Secret Service operative turned away and motioned for Kendall to follow. At the elevator door, just out of ear-shot of the nearest printer, Scott asked as he pressed the button—

"Do you know the name of that last chap?"

"Friebus—Edward Friebus. But, I say, Dave, aren't we going to search the plate-press floor and the dressing-rooms?"

Scott laughed grimly. Then he ceased his cigar-chewing long enough to say:

"No use, Old Top. Those plates are miles away by this time. We're up against a top-notch scheme. It's a mixed job, half inside and half outside. And if I don't nail those plates tonight we may not get 'em for months. And in the meantime they may use the Doyle method of bleaching new one-dollar bills and making Buffalo Tens out of 'em. A grand scheme; millions in it!" The man-hunter chuckled grimly. "Genuine plates, genuine paper, and nothing for 'em to do but to buy a numbering machine and run opposition to the Government."

The lights of the ascending elevator appeared.

"Not another word," Scott cautioned, "till we get to your office."

ONCE inside the Director's private room, the Operative snapped on all the lights, then hastily consulted his watch.

"We've got to work quick," he went on to say. His keen brown eyes sought those of the Director. "Otherwise we may have to call in the entire issue of Buffaloes."

Kendall frowned and was about to venture a remark, when his friend resumed:

"Listen to every word: There's a twelve-foot space between the north wall of the Bureau and an iron picket-fence, isn't there?"

Kendall nodded.

"And it wouldn't be a very difficult matter for a man on the inside to toss a pair of plates over that fence onto the snow-covered turf just beyond?"

Again the Director nodded affirmatively. A light came to him. He began to realize what an easy matter it would be—granting darkness and confusion—for a plate-printer to hurl a pair of precious plates through an open window to the feet of a waiting accomplice outside the grounds. And, no buildings of any sort on that unfrequented side of the Bureau being nearer than the Washington Monument, it occurred to Kendall that the plotters had had an easy task. Free from observation, cloaked by darkness, doubtless the ultimate thief was now well on his way—where?

"First thing you do, call up the chief watchman." Scott picked up his overcoat which he had laid aside just previous to his visit to the ink-mill. "Tell him," he went on, "to pass me out. I'll flash my star on him so he'll be sure I'm the right party. Then I'll see what sort of a story the snow has to tell me. My light, please."

Kendall passed Scott the latter's flash-lamp, then turned to pick up the telephone receiver.

"Just a moment," said the Secret Service man.

With an arm deep in the sleeve of his overcoat, he paused to think.

"The inside party may be any one or two out of fifty printers," he said presently. "But we'll take a chance on Mr. Poor and Mr. Friebus. It's not reasonable to suppose that a man would steal his own plate to chuck out the window, with other backs and faces all around him. So we'll assume that *that* was the very stunt pulled off. While I'm outside, and after you've made sure that nothing else is missing, you send for Poor and Friebus. Tell them that they're not under suspicion, then put 'em in separate rooms and order 'em to make out long written reports embodying the facts of the case. I'll be back before they've finished."

The door closed softly behind Scott as the Director told Switchboard to connect him with the guard-room. His message to the chief watchman delivered, he then sent for the two plate-printers and followed out Scott's instructions.

Fifteen or twenty minutes passed, when the Secret Service man re-entered the room. Without pausing to remove his overcoat or address a word to the Director, he settled himself at the telephone and snatched the receiver from its hook.

"Give me 'the outside,'" he snapped into the transmitter. Then, "Long distance—hurry, please!"

Kendall, his facial muscles tense with concern and curiosity, listened for the next words. He knew Dave Scott of old—knew well the marvelous reasoning and deductive powers possessed by this big-chested man from the fourth floor of the Treasury Department building.

The squeaky rattle of Miss Long Distance came faintly to the Director's ears, but Scott cut her short.

"I want Baltimore—quickly!" he said. "Private wire two-eight-two. Bill Secret Service for the call; official business, Government rates."

During the pause that ensued, Scott laid his open watch on the desk before him. Then he drew from a side pocket of his overcoat a piece of paper containing what appeared to the Director to be several damp cigarette butts. These he examined closely, until the lapse of time brought his eyes back to the speeding second-hand of the watch.

"Shake 'em up, girl!" he growled into the instrument after working the hook up and down several times.

"Hello!" he said an instant later. "This you, Parker? . . . Never mind that now. . . . Yes, I'm in Washington. Get this: Two plates stolen from the Bureau of Engraving and Printing this evening. A face and back plate for the Buffalo Ten. One of the men we want *may* be on B. & O. train 26, due there in eighteen minutes. Or he may be on Penn. train 14, due at Baltimore in half an hour. If he tries his get-a-way over the Southern, we've got time yet to nail him here in town. Now, get this straight: The man we want wears Corrigan rubber heels, smokes 'Pasha's Pleasure' cigarettes, uses a pocket cigar lighter of some sort, and he *may* have a woven cane suitcase with him two feet long and six inches deep. Or he may have checked it and mailed the check ahead somewheres."

A brief silence ensued. Scott was listening to the man at the other end of the wire.

"No, no," he broke in suddenly. "Never mind holding him for extradition. If you get him with the goods, fetch him right here to the Bureau. We've got other fish to catch, and we need him. I'll agree to square the kidnaping end of it by getting a year lopped off his sentence. Call me up after you've gone through 26. And handle the plates carefully. You know what I mean. So long."

Moving the hook up and down, Scott was soon in touch with Central, who connected him with the office of the Superintendent of District Police.

"I want Major Hanrahan in person, unless he's gone to his Club," the man-hunter told headquarters. "This is Scott of the Secret Service."

A brief paused followed, then Scott spoke again.

"Good evening, Major; hope you're feeling chesty this fine December eve. . . . Fine, thank you. I wanted to ask you if you can get out a general alarm for me before your night men go on duty. . . . Good! Here you are: We want a man wearing Corrigan rubber heels, who smokes 'Pasha's Pleasure' cigarettes, lights 'em with a pocket igniter, and who'll probably be carrying a woven cane suitcase two feet long and six inches deep."

Other particulars followed, then Scott called up his own chief and acquainted him briefly with the facts of the case.

This accomplished, and the Secret Service operative leaned back, grinned at the Director, and began to chew on a fresh cigar.

"Clues to burn in the snow," he said. "Heel-prints, an impression of the bottom of a suitcase, two marks where the plates struck and dug through the snow into the turf, and three big cigarette butts showing the brand."

"Yes," said Kendall admiringly, "I follow you partly. I can understand that a suitcase would be the most convenient article to take the plates away in; and I get you in the matter of the heel-prints and cigarette butts. But how do you know the thief used a cigarette lighter? Even though you saw no burnt matches lying around, that's no proof that the fellow didn't light his cigarettes from the burning butts of the others."

Scott was about to answer, when the telephone bell jingled.

"Yes, this is Scott," he said.

He listened for a few moments, then "hung up" and faced Kendall.

"Not on the B. & O. train," he said, "unless he changed his shoes and planted the suitcase. There's not a cane suitcase on the train, and only three pairs of rubber heels. The wearers all happen to be women."

The Director chafed as the minutes flew by, but Scott took the wait coolly, his eyes half closed and fixed upon the long row of framed portraits of former Secretaries of the Treasury and Directors of the money factory.

"About that cigar lighter," Kendall prompted, with the object of making conversation.

"That's a mere elementary proposition," laughed Scott. He indicated the three cigarette butts. Two of them represented cigarettes that had been barely half consumed.

"A man who lights one cigarette from the butt of another, almost invariably smokes down to a pretty short stub," the man-hunter went on. "The party who smoked the cigarettes represented by these butts scarcely knew that he was smoking at all. He was too nervous. He was waiting watchfully for the appearance of something vastly more important. So he smoked automatically as it were, throwing away the half-smoked cigarettes, and lighting fresh ones. And as no burned matches were in sight I concluded——"

Again the telephone bell electrified the Director, and this time the wire bore good news.

"Got him! Got him on the Penn. train!" declared Scott as he turned from the instrument. "And it's our old friend Thomas Jerrold, alias 'Tommy the Rabbit,' ex-plate-printer and all-around thief. He's waived extradition, and he'll be over here about ten."

"And can you make him tell who his accomplices are?" Kendall asked. He wanted no thieves in the Bureau—nor suspects either for that matter.

"The Rabbit has never yet belched on a pal; but in this case I have strong hopes of inducing him to let me know whether there are two men here in the Bureau heading for jail, or whether there's but one."

II

"SO YOU won't squeal on your pals, Mr. Rabbit?"

The weazened man with shifty eyes and cigarette-stained fingers straightened up at the question.

"You'll have to dig it out for yourself, Mr. Scott. I ain't talkin', except through a lawyer. Much obliged for your promise to get me a year less if I'm found guilty. That's why I was willin' to come along without papers."

"But you'd better reconsider, Rabbit. *Both* of your pals are in the cooler now, and they've both coughed up all they know about you."

Scott's tone was serious, but the Rabbit wouldn't have it so. He laughed boisterously.

"They *both* belched on me did they?" he asked with a decided stress on the word "both." "You can tell that to the judge," he went on. "Second and third degree work doesn't take with me. And you've got to prove that that's my suitcase. This dick—" he indicated the man from Baltimore—"comes sashayin' through the train, pipes a suitcase that don't belong to me, asks me for a cigarette, then for a light, and *then* pinches me. 'Twon't work."

"So you only had *one* pal on the inside?"

Scott eyed the Rabbit keenly, and noted the shadow of disgust which flitted over the face of the other. But the accused stood mute.

"Send for those two men, please," the Secret Service man directed.

Ushered in, the plate-printers looked wonderingly at their chief, his guests, and the handcuffed man now seated in a corner. Scott went straight to the point.

"Men," he began as he opened the suitcase and brought out the two plates, "here is your paraphernalia back in the Bureau again."

Handling the plates carefully by their edges, he laid them face down on the table before him.

"These plates were thrown from the window and landed at the feet of a confederate waiting outside. One of the plates was inked; the other, clean and bright. But two men have handled this inked plate since it was tossed from the window—that is, handled it otherwise than by the edges. And those men are the thief who tossed it out of the opened window, and the thief who put it in the suit case. Their thumbprints are both here. Now——"

A snarl came from the corner, interrupting the detective. But instead of looking in that direction he eyed the two plate-printers.

Poor looked relieved, but Friebus was trembling and evaded the Secret Service man's glance.

"Might as well own up, Friebus," Scott suggested. "I'm not going to ask you to make a thumbprint as a test unless you insist on it."

Joe Poor pressed forward with upraised thumbs, but Friebus hung back. One regretful look at the dull black surface of the plate, and he shot a glance at his confederate.

"We lose," he muttered significantly.

And the Rabbit nodded downcastedly.

OVER their cigars—the Director smoking, and Scott chewing his—the two friends sat with the table between them and discussed the case.

"I think," said Kendall, "with all due credit to you for your deductions, that there was a bit of luck with you after all."

"How so?"

"In tracing down the inside man so quickly. If the Rabbit had stood firm, and had gone to trial without squealing, it would have been a man's size job to run down the other. It was lucky that you had the thumb-prints to fall back on."

"But there *were* no thumb-prints."

Scott pointed to the inked plate. Bending over it, Kendall saw that its inked surface, now dry, was smooched and rubbed from margin to margin. If there ever had been any finger or thumb-prints, contact with the snow and the lining of the suitcase had destroyed them.

"Pure bluff," grinned Scott. "Sometimes it works."

Kendall whistled.

"But you were lucky at that," he persisted. "Take all those traces in the snow. If it——"

" 'If it wasn't for buts and ifs and ands,' " Scott quoted softly.

"Especially *butts*," laughed Kendall.

ETHICS

by J. FRANK DAVIS

THE road began in West Street, New York, and ended a few miles outside Hidalgo, on the Texas side of the Rio Grande. And it was odd that I should have been at both the beginning and the end of it, seeing it wound through Cuba and Nevada and South Africa and Mexico and ran on for eighteen years. Queerer still, perhaps, that from time to time through all that interval I came out upon the road, and traveled briefly along its windings—and never once knew it.

Fritz Altgelt, when first I knew him, was filibustering to Cuba. When last I saw him, he had just closed an open account of long standing. But first and last, and at all times between, he was by birth a gentleman, by trade a soldier of fortune, and by instinct a patient and philosophic fatalist.

He was perhaps twenty-eight or thirty years old that first night I met him in the back room of "One-Eye" Dempsey's saloon, back in the Autumn of 'ninety-seven—a fine, upstanding blond savage, with the carriage his three years in the German army had given him modified by the grace that comes to those who keep sober and knock about the North and South American ports, where dollars are to be had by sufficiently adventurous adventurers.

The scars across his left cheek-bone and down the right side of his chin—he got them honorably at Leipzig—were distinguishing rather than disfiguring. His eyes were blue and cold, and his voice deep and vibrating, and just a bit guttural. He spoke English with the slightest German accent, and Spanish with the slightest American accent, and French like an Alsatian—and German, I imagine, like a Prussian.

Harry Rolfe, who introduced us, was all mixed up with the Cuban revolutionary junta, operating in that day from a little smelly hotel down below the Twenties, and Harry was my passport to warm acquaintance—almost friendship—with Altgelt. They talked freely before me of what had been done and what was in the wind.

I met some of Altgelt's followers, a pretty rough and reckless lot, take them by and large. They were decidedly in funds just then, and spending their money freely about town, without thought of the morrow.

This was soon after the famous expedition of the four-hundred-ton *Mary Jones*—plebeian name for so adventurous a craft—that landed a lot of mighty welcome rifles and ammunition for General Garcia down in a seldom-visited bay on the southeast coast of Cuba, and there was another trip afoot. This was to be more elaborate and much more dangerous. Cannon—some machine guns, too, as I recall it—were to be run into the same place. The United States authorities were wise that something of the sort was in the wind, and it was going to be touch and go to pull off the trick.

The rank and file of Altgelt's band didn't know what was coming next, nor especially care, I imagine. It would certainly be dangerous, and if successful, it would probably be profitable. That was sufficient. When Fritz needed them, word would be dropped in the right quarters a couple of days ahead of time, and they would be ready for whatever might be the program. Two men only were in their leader's full confidence—Old Bill Riley and Ed Moore.

Old Bill was captain of the *Mary Jones*, a weather-bitten, taciturn oyster of a man, about sixty-five inches tall, who looked too mild to be a filibusterer, and was said to know every reef and shoal and trick of wind and tide in the Caribbean with his eyes shut. Ed Moore was Altgelt's first lieutenant.

He was an Englishman, of good blood apparently, perhaps one of those younger sons. Tall, rangy, with fair skin, and a heavy, stubborn jaw, he would have been handsome but for his shifty way of dodging a square look into your face—was handsome if you didn't make a practise of studying eyes.

I never exactly understood why Altgelt took him up as right-bower. It wasn't like him to overestimate men. Probably, like many really strong characters, he was contemptuous of any one's power to injure him. And Moore was as nervy a gun-runner as the most chance-taking adventurer would want behind him, and had a reputation from New York to Buenos Aires as a tremendously quick and accurate pistol-shot.

It was in Dempsey's back room that I met Fritz, but mostly elsewhere that I continued the acquaintance. One-Eye wasn't a good man to associate with when plots were afoot. He had been involved in too many sensational South American episodes before he retired from the sea and went to serving strong waters to sailormen, and the secret service had a habit of noticing what went on in his place.

We used to foregather—Rolfe and Altgelt and Moore and Captain Bill and I—down in a little table d'hote restaurant in a cellar off lower Broadway, where the odors were principally garlic and chili, and the language was usually sibilant, and complexions averaged all the way from fish-belly white to chocolate without cream.

It wasn't all "shop" that we talked, by any means. The scheme to run the Cuban guns was pretty well under way, and only waited additional deliveries by the manufacturers to be completed. Villains seldom work at being villains twenty-four hours in the day, and plotters do not plot asleep and awake. Although often illustrated with unusual references to past performances, our talk was usually the small conversation of intelligent and well-posted friends who enjoy one another's company.

Altgelt was a man of unusual education, plus wide experience. Moore was hardly second. Whoever he might have been—you wagered, instantly you set eyes on him, that Moore was not the name his father bore—he had been well bred. There was a trace of Oxford in his accent, or perhaps it might have been University of Dublin. He knew books as well as men. Ashore, he used clean language.

A few sentences out of one of our talks comes back to me. At the time they were only a piece of idle argument; in the light of subsequent events they are significant.

There had been some reference to a report, current among the gun-runners, that a former associate had been killed in Colombia or Panama by a companion who thought he had been cheated in a spoils division.

"And served him right," said Moore.

Altgelt shook his head.

"He deserved it," he said. "But it was murder."

"Isn't 'killing' the approved word?" I asked.

"*This* was murder," said Altgelt, positively. "Costigan didn't have a chance. He couldn't even reach for his gun, if he had one."

"The chief has a system of ethics as to homicide," laughed Moore.

"Yes," said Altgelt seriously. "That's what you'd call it, I suppose—or principles. One doesn't follow my trade long and not kill men. But note this: I have killed in battle, which is a legal thing to do, sometimes commendable. I have killed in self-defense. That is elementary human nature. But killing another man who has it in his heart to kill you, and is striving his level best to do it—that is a game, and both players take their chances. It is when you eliminate the other man's chance that killing is murder. And I have never committed a crime," he added simply.

"Gun-runnin' an' revolutionin' bein' no crime, notwithstandin' the United States statutes made and provided," chuckled old man Riley.

"Neither crime nor sin," defended Altgelt. "A rebellion is merely a revolution that has not yet become successful. It is no more a moral wrong for me to help a Cuban junta than it was for Steuben or Lafayette to give their services to the rebellious English colonies. Oh, yes, I do it for profit," he conceded, "but if that alters the morals involved, show me. It makes no difference that the statutes of nations forbid traffic in arms to be used against a friendly power. That is merely a reciprocal political arrangement. It makes the offense something to be prevented or punished, but it does not make it a crime.

"Everything I have done," he said slowly, "and everything I shall do, I think, has been legal according to the view of the government that employs me. If I were to join the United States secret service, and set out to help Bannerman prevent filibustering" ("God forbid!" grinned Riley), "what violence I had to use to do my work would be as immoral, or as moral, as though I were to hurt some Spaniard who tried to stop me landing and delivering a cargo."

The subject shifted.

THERE was a little Cuban named Castro connected with the revolutionary junta, an oldish, whitish party, with a gray mustache and goatee, with whom Altgelt transacted most of his official business. Castro had a daughter named Nita, as pretty a slip of a girl as Santiago de Cuba ever produced. And Altgelt was in love with her; that was as plain as daylight to any one who ever saw them together. Also I think Castro knew, and had no objection.

A rather desperate little flirt was Nita, as Latin-American girls are likely to be when uncaged in the less conventional atmosphere of the States. She had smiles for all the men—even old Captain Bill, who was fifty at least, and strikingly unattractive.

Toward Altgelt, so far as I could see, she was neither more nor less friendly than toward the rest of us. Not a man in the coterie except himself knew that Moore was set upon getting her, least of all, Altgelt.

None of us thought much of it the night Fritz and Moore had a little falling out. It didn't seem important.

Castro and Nita were going somewhere to the theater with two or three friends, including Ed Moore. I think Fritz had been invited and had declined on the ground of an appointment. Altgelt, Moore, and I were dining with them about seven o'clock, and a messenger handed Fritz a note. He excused himself punctiliously and read it. Then, turning to Moore, he said:

"You'll have to cut out the theater tonight. I've an errand for you to do."

No offense was meant, certainly, in the choice of the word, but it riled Moore.

"I'm not an errand boy!" he snapped.

Fritz turned and looked at him level-eyed.

"You will be tonight," he said very softly, "considering that it is an important matter."

Moore reddened, and then turned white, and his eyes fell.

"Oh, all right," he murmured, the habit of obedience to the chief apparently overcoming his anger.

Fritz turned and resumed the conversation as though nothing had happened. The others in Castro's theater party came in and he and Nita went away. Moore received instructions, and departed to carry them out. But he had been humiliated before the girl. And he was a rotten egg.

It may have been that night that Moore decided to do what he did. It hardly seems sufficient cause, but maybe there had been something before. Who can guess the little things that combine to make a man do big ones? At any rate, matters came to a head within less than a week.

There never had been a better-planned scheme to land a gun cargo where it would help the Cubans to make General Weyler uncomfortable. And a couple of evenings after the little scene between Altgelt and Moore, word came to Fritz that the cannon and what not, carefully packed in piano cases and other deceptive packages, had been delivered to a certain storage loft on West Street, about nine blocks above the dock where the *Mary Jones* lay with Federal secret service men watching her in relays, day and night.

He sent word in the usual way, notifying the members of his crew to assemble two evenings hence at various points near the storage loft. They were still in ignorance of exactly what they were to do or how they were to do it; Altgelt, Moore, and Captain Bill would see that each did his share when the time came.

Getting off the cargo looked impossible

with the *Mary Jones* under constant surveillance—would have been impossible, of course, if the plan really had been to use the *Mary Jones*. But up the river, almost opposite the storage loft, where the guns and ammunition had been delivered, was docked another boat, the *Wanderer*, with a reputation as clear of suspicion as a doctor of divinity's. And she, secretly chartered, was to slip out and away with the illicit cargo while the *Mary Jones* laid peacefully in her slip and absorbed the attention of Uncle Sam.

It is unnecessary to go into the details of how the company met in three squads, coming from different directions by ones and twos, on the evening set for the getaway, with Moore in charge of the workers at the loft and on the wagons, Altgelt seeing to the stowing aboard the little *Wanderer*, and old Bill Riley slipping from chart-room to engine-room, snapping terse final instructions to deck officers and the boss of the black gang.

Suffice it that she was loaded at two o'clock and backed out into the stream at three, at which hour we had definite and reliable information that one secret service man was watching the *Mary Jones*, another, artistically unshaven, was having a drink in Dempsey's, with an eye on the back room, and that not a man had shown the least particle of curiosity as to what was going on in the *Wanderer's* slip.

What happened afterward I did not see—Rolfe and I waved good-by to the others as the bow faded into the North River—but all the stories agreed. After all, there wasn't much to tell.

THE *Wanderer*, running lights burning shipshape, as innocent-looking a craft as ever nosed from Manhattan toward the sea, was just passing the Battery when a blinding searchlight from close aboard to port stood every line of her out into sharp relief, and even as the occupants of the boat that threw it hailed her another light flashed from starboard.

"*Wanderer*, ahoy! Stop your engines!" came the sharp command.

"What's the matter?" drawled Captain Bill.

"The jig's up, Riley! We're coming aboard."

Altgelt stood immovable.

"It's Bannerman!" he said, through clenched teeth. "Stop her!"

"They never got onto this themselves," growled Riley, as he yanked the telegraph. "Some hound told. I'd kill him!"

"We've other things to think of just now," replied Altgelt. Then, raising his voice in the direction of the searchlight to port: "Come right aboard, Mr. Bannerman, and —— to you. Welcome to our city."

They all spent the night in a police station. Bail for Altgelt, Moore, and Riley was forthcoming the next forenoon, and Moore left the other two on the sidewalk in front of the station, with a promise to meet them that night at the usual place. Altgelt was on the jump all day, arranging the bonds for the other members of the expedition.

We assembled that evening in a mood to hold a lodge of sorrow. Fritz alone maintained a fair degree of cheerfulness.

"It is the fortune of war," he said. "Somebody wins all games. No man ought to be willing to win who can not stand to lose."

"I'd stand it if I could lay my hands on the traitor that gave us away," growled old Bill. "And I think I'll be after findin' out who it was," he added mysteriously.

This sounded plausible. The captain had some strong connections with police headquarters, which would be likely to know.

The conversation ran to the hiring of lawyers and the coming defense, although we knew the case was a cinch for the Government. Suddenly the door to our private supper-room opened, and Castro came in, white as a ghost. He had an open letter in his hand.

"They're gone!" he gasped in his native tongue. "The son of a half-caste mother! They're gone!"

"Who, man?" demanded Altgelt.

"Nita!" He held out the letter. "And Moore!"

"Gone? Gone?" stuttered Fritz foolishly. "Where?"

"Here it is, in the letter from her. They love! They are happy! They elope! Mother of God! It is all here. They go together."

Fritz snatched the letter from the old man's shaking hand, and his jaw set in a white line as he read. Slowly he laid the paper on the table.

"They sailed at five today on the *Admiral Hennessey* for Buenos Aires," he said.

A knock at the door was answered by Captain Riley, who talked for a moment in whispers with a red-haired Irishman that I remembered having seen on the *Wanderer's* deck the night before. He closed the door quietly, and turned to face us.

"Bannerman's office got the tip from Moore," he announced almost under his breath. "'Tis his life as well as his love he's takin' to Argentina."

Altgelt was as cold as ice and as dangerous as sin.

"The next boat to Buenos Aires?" he demanded. "When does she sail? Go and find out, will you, Rolfe? I'll——"

"'Tis a month to the court hearing on the *Wanderer*," interrupted Riley, "and we're under bail. No danger they'd let us skip the country."

"Moore got away."

"Use your head, Chief. To be course he did. 'Twas in his agreement with Bannerman, don't you see? You'll have to wait."

Fritz stood a moment, his eyes on space. He took hold of himself with an effort and relaxed almost naturally.

"You're right, Bill," he said quietly. "I'll wait. I'll—wait."

Some weeks later Altgelt paid a fine of five thousand dollars for himself and another of twenty-five hundred for Riley, and took an agreement from Castro that he should be reimbursed after Cuban independence had been recognized. The cash money at the junta's disposal was for successful gun running, not flivvers.

A few days later he booked passage for Buenos Aires, and as I had been called out of town on the day of the sailing, I went to his hotel the afternoon before to say good-by. As usual, I went to his room without sending up my name.

In the middle of the floor, coatless, stood Fritz. About his waist was a belt with a holster hanging on the right, very far down. In the holster was a pistol, and he was engaging in an occupation that I had heard of but never chanced to see—"practising the draw."

There is a vague idea in the eastern United States that when a skilled gun-man draws his revolver he pulls it from its holster, levels it, cocks it with his thumb, and then pulls the trigger with his forefinger, the operations proceeding in that order. If this were attempted in those parts of the world where gun-play is not infrequent, the person trying it would pass away, much perforated, before he had begun to think of performing Motion Three, to say nothing of Motion Four.

The practised hand with a pistol—say a Western gun-man or a Texas Ranger—does all these things, but he does them all at once, at least so far as the eye can see. As the pistol comes out of its holster his finger is already pressing the trigger. A twist of the wrist throws it into aim, and the thumb raises the hammer and lets go. If he does this more quickly than his adversary he wins; otherwise——

Aiming a revolver under such circumstances is largely a matter of instinct, after it is learned. The trick of successful gun-play becomes, therefore, a matter of speed in the draw, and gun-men acquire and maintain this by practise, practise, practise, just as the pianist exercises his fingers daily or the contortionist his back.

"Practising the draw" was a common enough exercise in the West and Southwest twenty or thirty years ago. It has largely gone out of fashion now; only a few craftsmen of the old school keep alive the trick.

Altgelt ceased from his occupation, and put away the pistol, smiling. We talked of various things—not Moore or Nita. I shook his hand, and wished him an abstract future of success. I did not see him again for nearly ten years.

From time to time I had news of him. At Montauk Point, in 1898, a Rough Rider friend told me he had seen Altgelt in Cuba, where he was fighting with the little bunch of natives who came along in time to do their unskilled best before Santiago. Three years later he was reported seriously wounded in South Africa, where he fought on the side of the Boers in the so-called Irish Brigade, recruited in the United States.

Somebody told me a few years afterward that he was doing some kind of rough police work in Alaska. Then I, myself, ran into him under somewhat sensational circumstances in Tonopah, when that camp was running wild and wide.

I WAS standing one evening in a crowded gambling-hall, watching the marble roll, with the roar and racket of the untamed town pouring in from the street, when at one of the faro-tables something happened that caused a sudden hush like the lull in the gusts of a hurricane. Any one familiar with wild resorts in frontier places knows the significance of that sudden calm, and looks quickly to determine the location of the trouble, flexing his muscles to leap out of the probable range of fire.

Two men came to their feet on opposite sides of the faro-table, and stood poised. One of them was the dealer. The other was Fritz Altgelt.

Things moved so quickly then that no one had a chance to interfere, if any man had wished to.

"I will say it again, if you did not understand," called Fritz, in his sonorous guttural. "You slipped two cards. You are a crook!"

The dealer half drew his gun before Altgelt moved. Then Fritz seemed only to lurch sidewise. The pistol flew undischarged out of the gambler's hand with the report of Altgelt's shot, and blood spurted from his right wrist. He fell to cursing.

"Did you see that throw?" in admiring tones, demanded a hard-looking citizen near me. "He hit where he aimed, too. He could have killed him just as easy as he winged him."

Some sort of peace officer—deputy-sheriff, probably—came bustling in, gun in hand. Fritz had put his pistol back in his belt and stood waiting.

There was conversation and movement about the table. The dealer was being helped to a back room, and some one was going for a doctor. Bystanders told the officer their stories of how Altgelt did not draw until after the gambler. Then the crowd parted as the players settled back to their games, and Fritz, headed toward the door, caught my eye.

"*Ach!* Holden, I'm glad to see you!" he exclaimed, shaking my hand. "But I can not stop. The sheriff advises me to take the night stage out. So we are ships that pass in the night, yes?"

"Great shooting," was all I could think of to say.

He laughed grimly.

"Practise makes perfect," he said.

The manner in which I have run into Altgelt in unexpected places almost leads me to perpetrate the bromide that the world is a small place. What strikes me as more unusual, though, is the brevity of the meetings.

It was in the late Autumn of 1910 that business took me to the City of Mexico. Deceived by a hack-driver, who assured me his horses were the fastest in the Federal district, I arrived at my hotel late; most of the other passengers on the train, I gathered, had passed us on the way. The tourist season was on. It was impossible, the clerk informed me, that I should get a room with bath. There were only two in the house, and both——

"Well met, friend," said a strong voice at my elbow.

Fritz Altgelt, from somewhere in the lobby, had seen my entrance. And what a gorgeous Fritz Altgelt!

He was in evening clothes, and the glad raiment set off his muscular figure and military carriage. The outfit was well-fitting and expensive. You could have bet a gold eagle against a revolutionary *peso* that a Fifth Avenue address was sewed into the lining. Obviously Fritz was come upon prosperous times.

He was holding his age well. His blond hair, grayed a bit at the temples, was still thick and wavy. His eyes were clear and bright.

"I have to go on," he apologized at once, as I was expressing my delight at the meeting. "Let us have lunch together tomorrow at, say, Sylvain's. There are friends I want to ask about. Too bad I have an engagement for this evening. I'll call here for you, if convenient. Shall we say at one?"

"I'll be tickled to death, old man," I accepted, and he lighted a cigar and went swinging out of the door and toward the Avenida San Francisco, as handsome a figure, I'll be bound, as ornamented the most beautiful city in North America that night.

I turned back toward the desk to find the same clerk, but, oh, how different a manner!

"The room for the señor—with the bath—it will be ready in a few moments," he said deferentially.

"Huh? You found one?"

"*Si.* For the señor we desire to present the best. It will be soon ready."

They showed me up, after a bit, to the best suite in the house. Finding a room with bath in Mexico City is no cinch, for all its reputation as the Paris of America. I wonder who they put out of that suite.

As I ate the *chico-zapote* that topped off my dinner, served on the balcony that overlooks the lobby, I called the head waiter.

"Did you happen to notice," I asked, "the gentleman who talked with me this evening, immediately after I arrived? Do you know him?"

"Know Señor Altgelt?" His gesture expressed amazement at the query. "Who does not?"

"I am a stranger here and have not met him for some years," I explained. "What is his business?"

"He is close, very close, to Don Porfirio," replied the waiter. "He is high in the Mexican secret police."

The next morning I received a telegram that made it imperative for me to return at once to the States. I bought my tickets for the night train to St. Louis.

At noon I stood in the hotel lobby waiting for Altgelt, when a Mexican entered and handed me a note. It was from Fritz, who had been suddenly called to consult President Diaz. Would I be good enough to postpone the luncheon until the following day? I wrote him a line explaining my sudden change of plans and expressing my regrets.

* * *

WHEN the Madero revolution reached its surprising climax, and the aged dictator quietly slipped out of the country, Altgelt elected to remain. He had large investments, I have been told, that would be lost if he followed his chief. He thought he could survive the change in administrations.

When his time came, not long after, he went via Vera Cruz rapidly, and in disguise. His properties were absorbed by friends of the amiable Don Gustavo Madero.

After that came the revolt against Don Pancho, the Huerta *coup*, and the embargo on arms from the United States. Altgelt went to gun-running again, this time across the border from Texas. I heard of him vaguely—once that he had been captured by Federal soldiers and stood up against a 'dobe wall; later, that this rumor was without foundation.

A newspaper friend of mine, returning last Spring from Villa headquarters by way of San Antonio, ran into Fritz in that city. He gathered that Altgelt was connected in some fairly important way with one of the Mexican juntas. Altgelt did not know him intimately, and was non-committal.

In August I went to Texas, away down on the border in Hidalgo County. Our bank is interested in some lands in that vicinity. It was while I was in the town of Hidalgo that the A. B. C. powers and Secretary Lansing opened their negotiations to bring about a Mexican peace conference, and there followed the invasion of Texas, "according to the plan of San Diego."

The absurdity of the scheme, which was to seize the southern counties of Texas and annex them to Mexico, did not deter sundry bands of peons from attempting it. Those *hombres* think, most of them, that the United States is unsettled north of San Antonio. They took the plan seriously enough, and paid for it, poor devils, with their lives. And the invasion was no joke for the residents of Starr, Hidalgo, and Cameron counties, during the time it lasted.

General Funston ordered additional soldiers to the border, the Governor of Texas recruited the Rangers to their limit of fifty men, and the sheriffs of the border counties swore in every available American who had a gun and knew how to use it, as a deputy to help clear out the bandits who had started to overrun the river country.

I sat on the little hotel gallery at Hidalgo when two automobiles rolled in from the north, the afternoon of the third or fourth day of the trouble. There were a few soldiers in khaki on the street, and a good many dusty white men with rifles, but few Mexicans, although that section is usually alive with them. Those few who went about the streets were ostentatiously unarmed, and attending strictly to their own business. The Mexican at large needed to be able to prove his good intentions, and *pronto*.

This was the same day on which a ranger captain, further up the river, returning with two others from his search through the chaparral, filed that somewhat famous report:

> Met two Mexicans, armed, who attempted to escape. We could not identify the bodies.

Several armed men, including an army officer, and a couple of Rangers, climbed out of the automobiles. Among them was a familiar, broad-shouldered figure—Altgelt.

There were more little lines in his face than when I last saw him, and the thin Summer linens could not set off his figure as well as the clothes he wore that Mexico City night, but he was as erect and youthful in step as ever.

To my astonishment, he stared at me as if I were a ghost.

"You!" he exclaimed. "Here?"

"Why not?" I smiled. "'Ships that pass,' you know."

It was odd how my presence seemed to startle him.

"That is so," he said. "Why not?"

We shook hands.

"By and by we must talk," he went on. "There is no Don Porfirio now to send for me—poor man."

He hurried in to secure a room; there weren't many, and competition was keen.

After supper we sat by his window and smoked. It was our first moment alone. From outside came the murmur of voices, all discussing the day's crop of invasion rumors and alarms. A detail of cavalrymen, fagged and dirty, had just ridden in, and was surrounded by curious townsfolk.

I told him briefly my business in the country. There was a pause when I had finished. Then:

"I have come down to join the hunt," he said rather queerly. "I was in Santone. I seek excitement. Today I have a commission to repel invaders. Tomorrow I go out—to hunt."

There was silence for a moment.

"To hunt," he repeated.

"I had an impression you were connected with one of the juntas," I said. "Tom Birch—you remember meeting him last Spring—told me so."

"Yes," he said. "Yes. I have been. I am." Another pause. "There is much information to be gained thus that is not gathered in other ways; and a fair living; and chances for excitement; and opportunities for——"

His voice trailed off.

"Well," he said presently, "somehow I feel like talking tonight. You recall Ed Moore?" Quietly he pronounced the name, but harshly.

I nodded.

"He was a hound," said Fritz musingly. "You remember I went to Buenos Aires?" I nodded again.

"He had gone," he went on. "He—he didn't marry her. She—what could a girl do when she had been left like that? Except what she did. Then, after awhile, she died. I was there."

"Yes," I said.

"So I went on about my business," he continued, almost as if he were telling the story of some one else. "It was a long time ago. Eighteen years next month since Bannerman held up the *Wanderer* before she had even lifted to rough water. We are getting a bit middle-aged, Holden.

"I went on about my business," he resumed. "My business is adventure. It always has been. It always will be, I suppose. I really don't know any other business. Sometimes I make money and sometimes I lose money, but I am not a business man. I have to have excitement. My ancestors all——"

He trailed off again into silence. Some minutes later he continued:

"AWAY back, before you and I ever met, more than twenty years ago, I saved Ed Moore's life. It was in Caracas. They had him a prisoner, and would have stood him up to the wall the next morning. I led a party; it was a bit desperate. We got him.

"I have the scar on my ribs now of the knife I got in that fight. I came near dying. But I saved his life. After that the life belonged to me, didn't it? That used to be the idea, anyway. It was a debt. I had a moral right to collect it."

He relighted his pipe and smoked slowly for some time.

"You would think I ought to kill Moore, wouldn't you? So did I. But I would not murder. Queer how a man can kill people in the course of his day's work and not make up his mind to do it in cold blood.

"There was that crooked faro-dealer at Tonopah. You saw that. He had a thousand dollars of my money. I couldn't get it back. They ran me out of town. I hated him for a thief. But I couldn't kill him for that, tho' it would have been easy enough.

"And it wasn't that I was afraid. I am never afraid. Consequences—that is, legal consequences—don't count with me. Perhaps I am afraid that dead men would haunt me if I murdered them. I don't know. However——

"He was in Cuba during the Spanish-American war, spying for the Dons. If I had met him in the field it would have been all right to kill him. I was with Gomez.

"Then he fought with his own people in

South Africa. He was in the Cape Mounted Rifles."

"You were with Lynch," I said.

"Yes. But we didn't meet. I got hit. When I was well, the war was over. He had gone gold-digging in the Klondike. Afterward he was in Nevada."

"And you followed him?"

"When they ran me out of Tonopah that night I had been trying to get a commission as deputy sheriff. He might have—done something. It was some time afterward that I heard he was in Mexico."

"Did you meet him?"

"Never. I kept perfect track of him for two years. He broke no law. He did nothing to warrant punishment.— Oh, yes, I could have sent the rurales at any time and told them to apply the *ley fuga*—the law of attempted escape—but that would be murder. Also I had to—do it myself."

"Did you, finally?"

"Not yet. He was with the Cientifico crowd after the Huerta *coup*. That was when I went—perhaps you heard—with the Carranzistas. Then, when the break came, and Huerta fled, he shifted to Carranza. He is with Carranza now." Another pause. "Did Birch tell you I was working with the Villa people?"

"He didn't know. Are you still?"

"I'm—" he laughed surprisingly—"today I'm with the State of Texas against all invaders. I'm a man-hunter."

He got up and walked across the room and back. He was still laughing, as at some concealed joke.

"Go out with me tomorrow morning," he said. "We shall start early. We will hunt, you and I. Tonight—" he began strapping on a belt with the heavy, low-hanging holster of a forty-five—"I must practise a bit, just as I was practising that last time we were in my room together. It is practise that makes perfect, yes? I might have need for speed when we hunt. *Gott!* Eighteen years! And you here, too!"

I went out and left him. A trifle uncanny, that disjointed talk. But think of the man who had followed his enemy all that time, and never met him!

It was barely daybreak when Fritz knocked on my door. Armed, we went out into the brilliant morning together.

"See," he said cheerily, showing me the edge of a folded paper in his pocket. "It is the commission. You are under the protection of the law."

We had secured horses the night before. He led the way north from the town and then turned toward the Rio Grande. Either he had been over the road before or he had good directions. He knew where he was going and why. My attempts to find out gained me no satisfaction.

"Is it not fine to ride out on a morning like this?" he countered, when I had hinted for the second or third time that I would like to know his plans. "We ride toward the river, and breathe God's fresh cool air —I think it will be hot later, with thunder, perhaps—and do our duty to the State."

Then we came to a little rise, and saw the golden-brown river, with the mists just rising. On the other side, nearly a mile away, was a group of mounted men. Fritz looked about carefully to see there was no one on our side to notice, and waved a white handkerchief three times. The group came down into the water and began to wade toward us. There were four men.

The river is wide at this point, some three miles above Hidalgo, but the channel is narrow. A few strokes, in August, will cross it.

When the men came to the channel they slipped off their horses, which began to swim. Each man held rifle or revolver high and dry above his horse. They remounted when they came into shallow water, and I made out that one of them, in advance of the others, was not a Mexican.

Fritz was beaming.

"It goes well," he said. "Let us dismount and leave the horses. We go to meet our friends."

"I don't know what it's all about, but I'll do anything once," I remarked, with an idea that this was a time for humor. "Hello! What does that mean?"

The three Mexicans had suddenly turned and were swimming their horses back toward the Mexican shore.

They had nearly reached the bank before their companion noticed they were not with him. He hesitated, shouted something unintelligible to them, and then came on. They were scrambling up the bank on the other side when he reached shore, dismounted, and turned as if puzzling out the cause for their conduct. He had replaced his pistol in its holster at his belt when he remounted in shoal water.

WE CAME upon him noiselessly around a bit of mesquite that had quite hidden us. The distance was hardly more than ten yards. He faced about quickly, and my heart jumped. Bronzed, hardened, with lines of dissipation in his face, and with whitened hair, it was Ed Moore.

"So," said Altgelt, and he smiled, "we meet after a long time. It is twenty years since Caracas, and eighteen since—other things. And now, it seems, you are an invader."

His voice was jeering, but he was standing as motionless as a cat just before the spring, his eyes on Moore's eyes, his body a trifle bent from the waist, his right arm hanging loosely, with the back of the hand to the front, and the fingers spread out for the clutch.

Moore had instantly dropped into a position not unlike that of Fritz. It was the pose of the gunman before the draw.

"Those *hombres*," the Englishman said, "came to me in Reynosa last night and told me there was an officer here who wanted me to come across and get orders. They said his name was Castanola."

"So you came across, armed, to invade the country of a friendly nation," mocked Altgelt. "You are one of the soldiers who fight under the Plan of San Diego."

"Am I fool enough to take any stock in that nonsense?"

"Is the evidence not perfect? Mexicans—with some foreign renegades—are invading. You are of a band. Your companions have run away. You are attempting to escape when you are killed. When you are killed, you understand—by me!" he repeated croakingly.

"Is this a plant?" demanded Moore.

"Of course it is a plant," replied Fritz. "I hired those *hombres*. I sent you that message. I am Captain Castanola, as much as there is any such man. Also I am a law officer, and I shall kill you as you try to escape."

"You're going to—murder me?"

"Murder? No. I have not drawn any weapon. You are a good shot, and quick on the draw. Go to it! I am waiting."

Moore's eyes flinched. The yellow will show. And there is no reason to believe he had ever heard of Altgelt's ability at gunplay. He was much the superior at that in the old days, you know.

"Are you afraid?" taunted Fritz. "You are a traitor! You are a dirty thief of women! You are a coward!" And then, as he paused, and still Moore's fingers did not clutch, he slowly hissed the last fighting epithet of the white world. And Moore snapped his hand to his gun.

Altgelt flipped his wrist and fired, as Moore's pistol was raising its barrel from the holster, and Moore's bullet tore up the ground at his feet. The Englishman pitched forward without a groan.

"And the report to the Governor," said Fritz, as he looked up from the body, "will be that a band of invaders attempted to cross into Hidalgo County, and that an unknown man among them was killed while trying to escape. Legally killed. Killed by an officer of the law, duly provided with a commission to do it. Executed! Executed—for all his crimes, old and new."

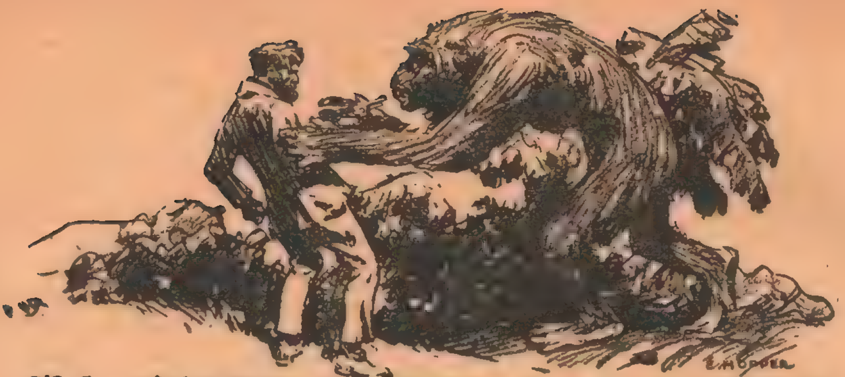
He laughed like a boy.

"*Gott!*" he cried. "How glorious it feels to have a clear conscience at last, after all these years!"

ADVENTURING

by MARY CAROLYN DAVIES

EVERY man adventuring, o'er the earth we go,
Adventuring, adventuring, in paths we do not know.
Trails cross, and trails are lost, and trails are cut anew;
Ere you take your way again, pal, here's luck to you!



The STORY OF WILLIAM HYDE

A FOUR PART STORY by PATRICK and TERENCE CASEY

Conclusion

SYNOPSIS—*William Hyde*, his green parrot straddling his shoulder, escapes from an angry Hawaiian mob and is hauled over a ship's rail and into the forecastle by *Kildare*, one of the crew, along with *Fitzhamon* who has also fled the isle for another reason. *Hyde*, a gentleman born, explains that he was taking money from the natives with a "shell-and-pea" game, that he might accomplish the one thing he lives for—to return to Borneo and gain (along with something else) the Green, Green God, a treasure of which both the others have heard. *Hyde* then hints at a race of Tartars who guard the Jallan Batoe, an extinct volcano in the heart of Borneo, the subject of rumors throughout the South Seas. When *Fitzhamon* doubts that *Hyde* had actually seen the Green, Green God, the latter hammers him insensible, and, his experiences flooding back on him, is swept into telling his story to *Kildare:*

While hunting orchids (tells *Hyde*) I came upon this Jallan Batoe. A golden-skinned people live there—a leftover from a raid of the famous Genghis Khan; live in dwellings hollowed from huge stones that "sing" when they cool at night from the sun's heat. Their tradition is that one day a descendant of Genghis Khan, his "man-child," with blue eyes and red beard, like the old Tartar emperor's own, would come—either to lead or destroy them. They looked into my blue eyes, marveled at my red beard, then led me to their *Dobo* to make me king. There I saw the Green, Green God—a parrot carved from a single emerald. One of these people I loved—my *Golden Feather of Flame*. One of them, *Lip-Plak-Tengga*, High Priestess, seemed to know I was only a white man. She loved me, but a fear of her grew up in me.

From my throne I learned that these Poonan believed I was about to destroy them—kill all because of a sin committed against Genghis Khan by their ancestors. The High Priestess begged first for them, then for her own life. Drunk with realization of my power, I threw her aside. I wanted only my *Golden Feather of Flame* and the Green, Green God. And in their terror the Poonan cried to their queen to save them.

She fell at my feet and begged me to kill her if I would spare her people. Moved by her noble appeal I threw down my sword. Then it was I learned my *Golden Feather of Flame* loved me. So I won her for my bride by the Poonan marriage ceremony—a kiss.

Enraged at my choice, the High Priestess threatened me, and I learned of a huge, mysterious thing, her slave, which lived in the great *Dobo*. Later she pleaded with me to cast aside my bride and take her instead, promising the Green, Green God should be mine, with free passage to the outer world. I refused. I no longer wanted the priceless god; only paradise in the Jallan Batoe with my queen.

That night, in my elephant cave, I awaited the arrival of my bride. Two Poonan guards, *Old Mahong* and the *Gunner* paced outside the entrance. Suddenly the High Priestess appeared, bringing, covered in a basket, what she said was a wedding-gift from my *Golden Feather of Flame*. She slipped away. Soon my bride entered. She had sent no gift. We uncovered the basket, and therein lay the Green, Green God. At the same instant *Old Mohong* stepped inside. He saw the god and screamed his fear. He believed we had stolen the emerald parrot, that it would come to life, that the destruction of the Poonan was at hand.

If he escaped and told, we would be killed by the people. We overpowered and hid him in the cave. Then the second guard appeared. I leaped at him, but he fled. And we feared he knew all that had happened within.

CHAPTER XXIV

HOW HYDE ANSWERED A GRAVE QUESTION

SQUAT and heavily muscled as a pugilist, the Gunner was (Hyde swept on) but he was afraid of me. He had seen how I had served old *Mohong;* he was afraid I might do the same to him; and he may have had some greater cause to fear me. But, anyway, it was only fear that caused him to reach that left-hand entrance as quickly as he did. That entrance had been ten paces beyond him; but he reached that entrance in a trice, in three huge bounds.

And yet, despite his swiftness, I was right behind him. I was desperate to stop him.

I stretched out a hand and—I was that close to him then—grasped him by the cord that held his *jawat.* I caught him by that cord where it ridged over his backbone; but he was throwing himself bodily through the entrance at that moment and that cord snapped off in my hand.

His *jawat* in my hand, the impetus of my desperate effort hurling me on, I slapped with a tremendous force up against one stone wall of the entrance, while he fell headlong through that entrance and down the nine stone stairs.

I clung to that wall. My head seemed bursted like a balloon, my whole body was sick and shaken; but quickly, despite the whirling of my head, I made to follow him. For, at the foot of the stairs, he had staggered just then to his feet, shot a fearful look up at me, and was off, reeling and lurching, down the avenue.

But a hand upon my arm stopped me. It was Golden Feather of Flame, who had sped up behind me. She held me back.

"Do not go, do not go!" she cried, as if frightened at my rashness. "It is too late. You can not catch him. He knows the Jallan Batoe too well."

She was right. Already was the Gunner lost among the shadows of the palms and stones. I never could overtake him now.

"But what will we do?" I asked, quite at a loss. "He knows about old *Mohong.* He may know about the god. I wanted to make him a prisoner like old *Mohong*—I mean, the old *Adjie.*"

"Ssh!" she cautioned me. Then as she nodded her golden head she whispered: "Yes; I know what you wanted to do. But you should not have leaped at him as you did. That scared him. Even if he knew about that which is in the cave we might have coaxed him into the cave and then leaped upon him, and served him as we did the old *Adjie.* But you scared him away by leaping so."

I hung my head with a sense of shame. Surely enough, I saw now that I had blundered, had ruined the whole thing. But with a sudden thought I brightened.

"He never saw the god!" I said. "He did not cry out. And he would have cried out had he seen it. He could have seen it from within that entrance. But he never saw the god! His very face was not so expressive of fright and horror, as bewilderment and dismay. He had just come inside the left-hand entrance when I glimpsed him. I did not give him time to see the god. He only saw old *Mohong* trussed up like a ham. He never saw the god!"

"The great *Deewa* grant that it is as you say!" she said fervently. "But if he *has* seen that which is upon the couch—" and her voice grew cold as steel again, icy—"if he has seen it, we will be made aware of that very soon. The Poonan will make us aware of that. All the Poonan will come here, and they will kill us both, without respect for our rank, without thought of mercy—with only that horrible brutality which is born of fear!"

She put a hand once more upon my sleeve.

"Let us take it back, *Raj!*" she pleaded. "Let us put that which is upon the couch into the basket and together take it back tonight to the Stone *Dobo!*"

I looked at her as she stood there in the entrance, the torch held with one golden classic arm high above her head, its sputtering flame throwing a red glow over the raw gold of her hair; I looked into her greenish Egyptian eyes, begging up into mine with love and great fear; and I nodded.

I was no fool. I was no fool like the kind you read about in stories. I had come into the Jallan Batoe for the Green, Green God; but I did not want the Green, Green God now. I had told *Lip-Plak-Tengga* that, and I meant that.

I did not want to take the Green, Green God to the outer world. I did not want to go out into the outer world myself. For where in the outer world, even if I turned the Green, Green God into its worth in gold—where in the outer world could I find, or buy, a paradise like that of the Jallan Batoe, a paradise where I was King, and where the bravest and most beautiful woman in all the world loved me? Such love as hers never was to be purchased.

I grasped the slim hand that trembled upon my sleeve. I stood facing her, looking down at her. And thankfulness for the great love she was bestowing upon me swam mistily in my eyes then; and words of thankfulness, words of the very prayers I had tried to recall a short time before, rang echoingly through my mind.

I grasped her hand. I grasped her hand at that moment, solemnly, humbly, for all the world as if we stood together, she and I, before some holy high altar.

"*Belun-Mea Poa-Poa,*" I said quite

shakily, "you married me fair and square according to the Poonan marriage ceremony, and even though that ceremony consists only of a kiss, you are standing by that marriage as no woman I ever have known would have done! It is not because I doubt the sincerity, or the grace of that ceremony that I do this, now. But I want to marry you straight and honest, as best I can, according to my lights. *Belun-Mea Poa-Poa* I'll marry you in the sight of Heaven, so I will!"

I was a man inspired. My earnest desire to be worthy of her great love for me, her great love and even greater sacrifices for me, inspired me.

I held her hand and we stood there, facing the darkening night, facing for all we knew, imminent torture; impending, nameless death. And her hand in mine, I recited what few words I could remember of the marriage ritual they used back home. What I could not remember, word for word, I stammered in my own rough speech; for I thought only to be true to my holy idea, and to make her my wife straight and honest, and as best I could.

She did not understand what I was saying—for I was speaking, then, in English—but she stood very quiet, very humble, her hand warm and trembling in mine. She knew, though, that death was very near us that night; and she knew, further, that the words I uttered were devout words, words which it choked my throat to utter.

But spare me repeating here the words I said then. There was no priests or minister of God to speak those words, no book nor ring to give those words the solemnity due holy things. And so, if I were to repeat those words here, to you, my marriage to Golden Feather of Flame, that night, might sound like a matter of mere words; to you again, it might seem as though I burlesqued, even blasphemed, sacred rites; and of a certainty, to you, those words in the coldness of the retelling could not ring with that fire, with that intense earnestness which swam my eyes in mist, as I uttered them, and shook me in every limb.

But from my heart, I spoke those words; and deep in my heart, I believed in the virtue and blessedness of those words. I believed then—yea, and I believe to this day and always shall believe—that I made Golden Feather of Flame, that night, my bride in the sight of God!

And the indisputable fact remains that I have stood by that marriage ceremony. I have been true to *Belun-Mea Poa-Poa*, my pagan bride. And living or dead, in heaven or in hell, I ever shall be true to her!

For what I said in concluding that ceremony was in the nature of a solemn marriage vow, a vow to keep, a vow which rigidly I have kept! And what I said was:

"You are, in truth, my Golden Goddess, my Marshal Queen, my beautiful bride, my life! And I'll stick to you, Golden Feather of Flame, you and you alone, until death do us part, so help me God!"

Then, quite overcome by the depths of my sincerity and love, I dropped her hand and hastily flung down the corridor, and so into my cave-chamber. I would let no carved block of precious stone shake me off my high place as *Raj* of the Poonan and mate of *Belun-Mea Poa-Poa!* I would let no malignant love-mad High Priestess send me, like an overthrown Hyperion, headlong down from the sun and headfirst in to hell!

I would return the god! And the Poonan would have no cause to crush me; they would never know; for I would return the god that very night.

And then I would continue on as *Raj*. I would continue on as the lover and mate of Golden Feather of Flame, and we would stand side by side on the Nine-Times-Nine Throne through life, and we would be happy together in our great love; and perhaps—yes, perhaps there would be little golden heads, little children to strengthen, if such could be, that bond of love between us.

There on the couch, shimmering a deep green in the wavering torchlight, it lay—that accursed emerald of destruction and of dread. It threatened my paradise on earth. But I determined it no longer would threaten my paradise on earth.

I was nerved to a desperate pitch. I snatched it up, thrust it into the rattan basket, and, rattan basket under my arm, swiftly rejoined Golden Feather of Flame at the left-hand entrance.

She nodded bravely as she saw me, and thereupon beat out the flame of her torch against the wall. Then in the dark, like an echo of my thoughts, she spoke.

"It is well," she said. "We will bring it back. The Poonan will never know. We will bring it back to the Stone *Dobo* tonight!"

CHAPTER XXV

OF THE VENTURE THROUGH THE POPPY FIELDS AND THE WHISPERING BAMBOO

MIDNIGHT, that hour which the Poonan call the noon of night, had come and gone. The myriad stars that had glimmered in the vast round O of sky had swum past, and upon us then were those dark long hours that so patiently await the dawn.

We looked out of the left-hand entrance. There was no one about. The palms—a line of pickets below us—hung their plumes morosely down; and the stupendous stones all about were shadowy sleeping beasts, whelmed in feathery black growths, and still and dead, as if transfixed in a spell.

The rattan basket containing the Green, Green God, held close under my left arm, I went down the nine stone stairs from the Elephant Cave. Golden Feather of Flame came after. Once in the shadow of the picketed palms, I made to start straight down the avenue toward the Stone *Dobo*, which, at the far end of that avenue and on account of its white stone formation, showed out of the all-surrounding blackness like a gray cloud.

But with a whisper in my ear, Golden Feather of Flame stopped me.

"*Nda, nda,*" she breathed hurriedly, as if, once again, she were affrighted at my temerity. "We can not go down the Avenue of Palms, my *Raj*. The palms are too far separated, the shadows between not dark enough. We can not go down the Avenue of Palms. They might see us. Some one might see us."

The truth of her statements was very apparent. I nodded; then quickly asked—

"But which way shall we go if not down this avenue?"

"We will go a way that is blacker than the night, where the stones and growths will conceal us, where no one possibly can see us. It is a way parallel to the Avenue of Palms—a way between that avenue and the avenue on the other side. We will go beneath the trees and through the fields that lie behind the rear of the stones that face on this avenue and the stones that face on the Avenue of Camphor Trees beyond. Come!"

I followed.

"*Baik,*" I said. "Lead the way, for you know that way better than I do."

She led the way. She skirted in the shadows of the sentinel palms, the outcropping of the Elephant Stone, which was curved and carved in the shape of an elephant's trunk; she sped by the open space about the foot of the nine stone stairs of the right-hand entrance; and then where the Elephant Stone ended in a walk of banana trees, she led the way beneath the great leaves and the weighty bunches of bananas toward the rear of that stone.

Here, at the rear of the Elephant Stone, she turned her face once more in the direction of the Stone *Dobo*, and started on between the fruit trees, in a line corresponding to the line of the Avenue of Palms we had just left.

Rising above the trees on either hand, now, were many great towering shapes. I knew, of course, that they were the cave-stones; and I knew further, though I could not make out this feature, that they all were carved into resemblances of animals; for to me, in that midnight gloom, they all seemed incomprehensible shadows, bulky and stupendous, and very, very black.

Belun-Mea Poa-Poa, however, knew the Jallan Batoe by day and by night. Come of that intimate knowledge, even in the gloom she could make out which carven rear of a stone depicted the crouching hind legs of a tiger, which the thick, powerful flanks of a rhinoceros, and which the buttocks of a *tembadu*. To her, each was a guide-post pointing the way toward the now invisible Stone *Dobo*.

And thus it was that she led the way with a certitude which to me was amazing. For that way was thickly black now, truly as she had said, blacker than the night. We were moving between banana trees which were like preposterous huge cigars, and which were crested, high above our heads, with leaves immense and twice as tall as myself. Those immense leaves and the smaller but more numerous leaves of jack-fruit trees and heavily-laden *durian* trees, formed a sort of canopy over our heads.

Times came when we realized how providential was that canopy; and those times came when we had to skirt beside open broad patches of fields, which bordered the fruit trees and were sown to low-growing tapioca and tobacco, and slender sprouts of jungle maize.

Once we came slap up against a rude fence of rattans, spun between the trees, and enclosing a soggy area planted to rice. We moved, in the welcome darkness of the trees, around that area. But a natural phenomenon about the rice-paddy stirred my brain. On account of the marshy nature of the paddy, will-o'-the-wisps flitted with weird glowings just above the rice reeds; and it seemed to me, such was my state of mind, that those floating lights were eyes, glowing eyes, eyes of the Poonan watching us, stalking us.

A deal relieved was I, therefore, when we left that rice plot behind and stepped out, quite unexpectedly, upon a stretch of avenue which ran at right angles to the Avenue of Palms, and seemed to intersect that avenue. We could not halt then. Like scared, impetuous lizards we slipped across that broad avenue into the blackness of a thick plantation of palm-trees beyond.

But here I halted to look back. I never remembered having seen that avenue before, though I must have journeyed past it that day in going to and from the *Dobo*. I stopped Golden Feather of Flame with a hand upon the silken sleeve of her robe. I said:

"But that avenue we have just crossed—it is new to me. Are we right for the *Dobo?*"

She turned quickly and put a finger on my lips. She whispered, and her whisper was an imperative command:

"Do not speak! We must go in complete silence!" And she looked back across the wide stretch of avenue, ahead into the blackness of the palms, then to the right, then to the left—and all, covertly.

I did the same. I did not know why; it was not the first time she had looked about her in that manner; but I did the same.

WE MOVED on then in a complete silence. We moved slowly, cautiously, outfeeling our way with our hands, taking a certain deliberation in the placing of each step. For we were moving now through the blackness of that thick plantation of sago palms, the fernlike fronds of which hung low over our heads and shut out completely whatever little light there held in the night. Nowhere in that plantation was there a firefly or other speck of brightness to lift the Stygian gloom.

I was handicapped by the burden of that rattan basket under my left arm, and yet I seemed to move more quickly than did my bride. For she paused often now, to peer about her, first to the right, then to the left. In the gloom, of course, I could hardly see her; she was in that purple robe, almost an indiscernible shadow; but still I knew that continually she was peering, now to the right, now to the left. She seemed obsessed by some kind of fear. I sought to hearten her.

"Do not be afraid, my bride," I said. "If there is any Poonan lurking about this night I will kill him! Before he can make a sound, with my bare hands, I will kill him!"

I heard her voice then, low and tremulous, and close to my ear, as though she were afraid lest she should be overheard:

"Ah, it is no Poonan, no Poonan, I fear, *Raj*. It is—it is some one else—some one who forever is abroad in the night!"

I said no more. I knew whom she meant, and what thoughts I had then I dared not give tongue to. Only a short while before she had said it was no time for speech; and now I felt it was indeed no time for speech. I felt, if anything, it was a time for action.

My long .38 on its .45-frame, was heavy in my belt. Yet I had thought all along it might as well not have been in my belt. I had thought I could not use it. There was a reason. If I used it, the report of it would arouse all the Poonan. It would arouse them, and even if I fired it into the thick of them, while it might scare them, in the end they would prove sure to be too many for me.

Now, however, at those words of my bride, my free right hand dropped to the butt of that revolver, protruding from my belt. I peered to the right, to the left. About me was nothing but blackness. And yet, continually I peered to the right, to the left. Grimly, the while, I held onto that revolver butt, protruding from my belt.

We continued on. We continued on through that black mystery of palms; and then, altogether suddenly, we came to where the plantation ended in a broad field of opium poppies.

On the far side of that broad open field was a great clump of tenuous tall bamboo, and beyond and above that clump, like some white cloud in the dark night, bulked the stone shape of the goal of our desperate errand—the monstrous half horse, half woman of the Stone *Dobo*. I turned hurriedly to *Belun-Mea Poa-Poa*, as she made to skirt around that poppy field among the palisading palms of the plantation.

"*Nda, nda!*" I whispered. "Let us go on. Let us hasten straight on through that field, get to the *Dobo* quickly, and be done!"

Slowly, covertly, at the sound of my whisper, she looked about her, then started on, even as I had directed. Out into that field of opium poppies we flitted like two ghosts.

And like the ghosts of blossoms were those opium poppies in that midnight gloom. They all were white in color—a vague whiteness, which looked ghastly in the gloom; and all were motionless and dead as though from tropical lassitude.

Here, out in that field of languorous white poppies, there was no sound soever. The poppies, like bits of down, bent aside before our progress with a noiselessness almost uncanny. Nothing had voice. The night was profound, utter. Every growing thing seemed fascinated, as though awaiting the end of our desperate errand.

And then—and we no more than half-way through that field—arose in that profound stillness, the weird unearthly singing of the stones.

Now, in all my fears of discovery, my fears of making sound, never had I thought of that singing of the stones; and moreover, I had not been long enough in the Jallan Batoe to be used to that eery species of phenomenon. I halted dead; Golden Feather of Flame halted dead. We stood then like affrighted rabbits, like rabbits paralyzed with fright.

And we were the only motionless things in a world that shook and boomed like a mighty hollow drum. Behind, the palm-fronds crackled and rattled metallically, as in a harsh wind; ahead, the slender stalks of the bamboo-clump swayed and whispered; and about and over all, the stupendous stone beasts shuddered and roared like real beasts in the throes of pain.

Upon me, those vibrations of sound charged like a host of shouting Poonan. I looked about; I looked fearfully about; and I saw that the poppies were nodding and fluttering as if, through their ghostly whiteness, men were crawling on hands and knees!

"Let us go back, *Belun-Mea Poa-Poa!*" I whispered hoarsely. "Let us go back!"

But she did not hear me. The singing of the stones drowned my hoarse whisper, and for that, a moment later, I was thankful. For a moment later she turned back to me and, her own soul disquieted by that uproar in the night, she grasped my hand. Then onward, scuttling beneath that awful overtone of sound, glancing furtively to either side, through that field we went, hand in hand, like two frightened children.

But once we had plunged into that brake of bamboo there was no more holding hands. The panicled knobby stalks of the bamboo, three or more inches in diameter and fully twenty feet tall, were set so incredibly close together that they were as the straws of a monstrous broom; and in order to break through them toward the Avenue of Palms and the Stone *Dobo* just beyond, we had to press them aside with our hands.

What with the vibrations of sound in the air, that clump of bamboo was swaying with an undernote that was like a swishing whisper. We added to that whispering. As went aside the thin, elastic rattans, there was, close to our ears, a continuous whispering.

That bamboo had a peculiar property—a property like that of hay released from the press of its baling wire. Like swimmers striking out into water, we would sweep to either side with our arms the bamboo stalks close about us; and those stalks would sweep against the stalks farther back; and then all would bend away and swish back behind us. Thus, in a certain sequence, near and far away, the whole brake of bamboo seemed to be swaying and swishing.

It was very dark in that covert and yet, withal, I knew that continually my bride was pausing; looking to the right, to the left. I paused; continually I looked to the right, to the left. And still and tense of nerve and muscle, I listened. Far away from me, like the crackling of hay, would come to me, even then, the swishing whispers of the restless bamboo.

I felt I knew the cause of those stealthy whispers, and yet I became very uneasy, all nerves. It seemed to me that the bamboo all about us was alive; it seemed to me as if we two could not make all that continuous whispering through the brake. Others must be in that brake, bending aside the stalks.

And, indeed, some one might be close beside me, stealing along right at my shoulder, and I would never know. Some one might be between Golden Feather of Flame and me; and I would never know.

I pressed forward sharply. With my free

right hand, furiously, I forced a way. Though I could not see her now, in the blind blackness of the clump, I felt I must be near her. I held out my hand. I shouted to make myself heard in all that whispering of bamboo and uproar of stones.

"Give me your hand, *Belun-Mea, Poa-Poa!*" I shouted. "Put back your hand to me!"

My outreaching hand came in contact with a hand. I felt slim long fingers, a palm femininely smooth and soft. Tightly and securely I grasped that hand.

And thereupon I realized. I could not see that hand in the blackness, but there is nothing so acutely susceptible as the sense of touch. And my sense of touch told me now that though the fingers of that hand were long and slim as a woman's, that hand was a huge hand, inches longer than my own big hand. And there was hair on the back of that hand. Though the palm was soft as a woman's, there was hair on the back of that hand just like mine, only denser.

It was not *Belun-Mea Poa-Poa's* hand, no woman's hand at all. It was the hand of a man, a man bigger than I, a huge man. It was the hand of the Monster Man!

He was with us in the bamboo, with us in the whispering blackness, walking between my bride and me, spying upon us amid the swishing stalks, and yet I could not see him in the blackness—the unspeakable thing!

I dropped his hand. I almost dropped the basket under my arm. I reeled back, near to fainting, nearer to vomiting.

And then—then some one rushed through the bamboo, was in my arms, was clinging to my neck. It was *Belun-Mea Poa-Poa*, and she was whimpering:

"He brushed past me in the dark. He was close behind me—the Monster Man! Oh, take me back, take me back!"

With her nearness, her dire need of me, strength came back to me in a flood. I lifted her in my arms and, she clutching the rattan basket now, I crashed head down, furiously, straight through the bamboo, and out into the Avenue of Palms. There I turned, and, terror at my heels, I ran, blindly ran, directly up the center of that Avenue of Palms.

I know that along the whole length of that avenue, I encountered no living soul. I know no more. For when I came to a knowledge of my self, I was staggering up the nine stone stairs of the Elephant Stone with that double burden in my arms—my bride and the god.

I stumbled over old *Mohong* in the dark bend of the corridor. Upon the couch in the cave gently I placed Golden Feather of Flame. I straightened quickly then to look about me. But the Elephant Cave was exactly as it had been, save only the stone walls were thrumming with that overtone of sound, and the torches in those walls were burned down to mere stumps.

CHAPTER XXVI

AFTER WHAT MANNER HYDE AND HIS BRIDE AWAITED THE DARK

WHEN the singing of the stones died away later that morning, and simultaneous with the light of dawn I grew calm enough to question my wife as to who was that Monster Man.

"I do not know who he is," she answered hastily. "But I do know he is no Poonan; for he is bigger than any Poonan, bigger even than you, my *Raj*."

"Has he been here long?"

"Ever since I can remember. He is the vassal now of Flower of the Silver Star, but he was the vassal of her mother, who was High Priestess before her."

"But where did he come from? Who is he?"

"That I do not know at all, my *Raj*. I know little of him. Indeed, in the bamboo brake this night I came closer to him than ever I came before in all my life. It was terrifying. Let us not talk more of him."

But I persuaded her to conquer her recollections of that night and to tell me what she knew of the Monster Man. Truly, as she had said, she knew but little; and yet as little as she knew, none of the Poonan, save only *Lip-Plak-Tengga*, knew more.

It appeared that the Monster Man was a familiar of the High Priestess. He dwelt in the caves beneath the cyclopean cave-temple of the *Dobo;* and just as *Lip-Plak-Tengga* herself had told me, he attended upon her slightest call like some bad *antu* or evil spirit.

Never had he been seen in the sunlight. Of course, he had appeared in the daytime, during great ceremonies in the Stone *Doba*, just as he had on the occasion when I first saw him; but just as on that occasion he had never come out into the open where he could be fully seen.

To the Poonan then he was but a shadow, a shadow only blacker and more monstrous than the shadows of trees and growths; yet a shadow with life, who forever was abroad in the nights.

The mention of his name—the Monster Man—was enough to cause any Poonan to shudder; the mere talking of him now caused my bride to shudder; so, though I had learned a vague bit about the Monster Man, I left off questioning her further.

Through the next day we kept to the Elephant Cave, my wife and I, and waited. We waited for the darkness of night, during which time we hoped to make a second and surely a successful venture at returning the Green, Green God; and momentarily, also, through that day, we waited to hear the sound of men ascending the nine stone stairs, the sound of men coming to arrest us. We felt not like potentates but like prisoners.

Yet no command of men strode into our cave to arrest us; no watch of sentries stood guard beneath the palms before either entrance; no one at all entered either entrance to tell us there was reason for placing us under surveillance.

And still, withal, we felt that we were under surveillance. For all day long up and down the avenue passed and repassed Golden Men and Golden Women, now in twos, now in threes, and now even in groups of a dozen. They walked swiftly past as if intent on some urgent business; but always as they passed our stone, always they looked up suddenly and then as suddenly looked away. Not one of them but did that, swiftly, slyly; and not one of those groups but walked away with their heads held close together in low talk.

I watched them in secret just within the right-hand entrance. My wife sat within, upon the couch in the half-dark of the cave, the Green, Green God in its basket upon her lap. She had constituted herself a sort of inner guard over the Green, Green God, as I had to watch without at the right-hand entrance.

And I watched at that right-hand entrance to turn any one away from entering therein. I did not want any one to see old *Mohong*, where he lay in the dark, as I feared some attempt might be made to release him. I did not so much care if any one should enter the other entrance. My wife and I had agreed between us that I should signal her, if any one entered there, so that she should have plenty of time to put the basket down behind the couch, and cover it with the *pehang* skins, ready to her hand; and then she was to sit upon the couch before it, wholly collected and expectant.

We were determined, my wife and I, that should any one come and attempt to pry about, we would keep the Green, Green God concealed at the risk of our lives. We knew that was only another way of saving our lives. We were resolved, therefore, to stand between the hiding-place of the god and any spies; and they would have to bludgeon us down first, I assure you, ere they would win to that hiding-place, and drag forth the Green, Green God. But nobody bothered us, nor so much as halted before our stone, save and except to glance swiftly up at either entrance and then as swiftly, speaking in low tones, to speed on.

It was during the hours following midday, when the crackle of the dry leaves under the feet of those passing groups awoke sounds distinct in all that deadness of heat, that the low words of those passing groups floated to my ears. As a group of women passed I heard one ask softly—

"The poor old *Adjie*—are you sure?"

"*Ahé!*" nodded another. "The Man-Child bound him as we bind a bundle of leaves for a torch. The old *Adjie* is still in there." And she looked quickly up at the stone, the others as quickly following suit, and as quickly looking away.

A group of men passed then.

"*Adjie Tumbuk Ladda*," one was saying in guttural tones, "Chieftain Long Knife says that either the Great Marshal King is out of his knowledge, or else he is a devil-devil. He leaped at the *Adjie* as though he would eat him. He would have, too, the *Adjie* thinks, only he fled."

I smiled at that. The Chieftain called Long Knife was he whom I had dubbed "the Gunner." And to judge from that bit of eavesdropping, the Gunner had not seen, on the night prior, the Green, Green God on the couch in my Elephant Cave. None of the Poonan knew, as yet, that the Green, Green God was gone from the *Dobo*.

Well might I smile. For I knew, thereat, that *Lip-Plak-Tengga* had not informed them that the god was in my keeping.

She had kept her knowledge secret, even as I had thought she would. And I was safe—for a while.

But how long that while would last I did not know. And yet there was that about the fact that the High Priestess had kept secret her knowledge thus long which seemed to whisper of some slow deep game. *Lip-Plak-Tengga* was playing a slow, a deep game. I was sure now, with a tremendous certitude, that she was playing a slow deep game. She dared not act in the open. She dared not act the informer. Still was I the King and Man-Child to the Poonan; and she dared not match her words against that of the Man-Child, her assertions against what I, as King, might assert.

She would wait. That was her game. She would never inform the Poonan, but rather bide her time till they discovered the truth for themselves. I realized that and, in that realization, found hope. Many things might occur to put a new light on affairs; all might yet be righted ere that terrible discovery was made; for we hoped—hoped with a hope which knew neither metes nor bounds—to return that accursed god back to the Stone *Dobo* that night.

As it was, the Poonan had not the faintest glimmering of the fearful truth. Only concerned were they over what had befallen old *Mohong Wook*. To them, the binding and the captivity of the old fellow seemed quite an unaccountable, even tragic, state of affairs. They did not know why I kept old *Mohong* prisoner, nor could they guess what I was going to do with him. They probably feared lest old *Mohong* should suffer physically from the length and rigors of his captivity, or should come to some worse harm at my hands. For these reasons they furtively watched my Elephant Stone.

Of course it was a ticklish business, this holding the aged chieftain a prisoner. What of the long duration of his imprisonment and the severity of it—bound as he was hand and foot, unable to twitch a muscle, and lying in the draughty corridor—there was always the chance that he might contract some illness, such as pneumonia, which to so old a man might prove fatal. But his very captivity alone, not to speak of such a fatality, spelt suspicion of us by the Poonan.

That suspicion might lead them eventually into my cave to investigate. But even though I realized we could not afford to allow any suspicions to gather about us, while the Green, Green God was in our keeping, I had not the slightest notion of releasing old *Mohong* from his bonds and allowing him to go free.

That would be foolhardy—aye, worse than foolhardy. It would be as much as self-destruction to release old *Mohong* ere first we returned the god to the *Dobo*. If old *Mohong* were released now he would tell all the Poonan that the god was gone from the *Dobo*, that they could find it in our cave. The Poonan would rise up then and whelm us over. It would mean our disgrace, our downfall and our death.

Once we returned the Green, Green God to the *Dobo*, however, all would be well. We could release the old chieftain, thereupon, and let him tell all the Poonan. For the Poonan, of a certainty, would look first into the *Dobo* to see if the god really were gone; they would find it there, and then they would laugh to scorn old *Mohong* as a doddering, whimsy-haunted old man.

It still was not too late to return the Green Green God to the *Dobo*. As the Poonan did not know as yet that the god had been taken from the *Dobo*, they might never know. That night we would return the god, we would avert all the havoc that threatened.

And never would the Poonan know that the god had been in my cave. *Lip-Plak-Tengga* would be robbed of the opportunity to spring her secret knowledge. For we would formulate some kind of an excuse to explain why we had held old *Mohong* a prisoner; and if, even after all that, the Poonan should still entertain any suspicions of us we would live down in time those suspicions. We would live on through the years, Golden Feather of Flame and I, as King and Queen of the Jallan Batoe—as King and Queen of a paradise on earth!

THUS thinking, I did not forget, the while, to pay heed to the whispers of the passing groups. But they all were in the trend I have told you, all save one. That one came when the Gunner himself pssed by, in company with three men, who were as squat and almost as muscled as himself. He looked up, did the Gunner, his Chinese eyes mere glinting slits in the sunlight.

"It is strange that such misfortune should come to our old *Adjie*," he said, with a shake of his bullet head. "He did nothing to deserve it, for that I know, because a similar fate almost befell me. It seems as though misfortunes have come to all of us; for it is long since the Poonan went about whispering. It seems almost as if the Green, Green God *were* stolen from the *Dobo* and misfortunes blowing upon us, as it comes to life!"

One of the three men made a hasty sign of remonstrance.

"*Nda, nda!*" admitted the Gunner as he passed on. "I know it is not that the god has been stolen; it is no fault of the god. It is only the fault of the Man-Child, our King. Since he came we all have been whispering, it seems, and going about as though frightened. I do not know——"

But I could hear no more; he had passed on out of ear-shot. I turned thereat and went back through the corridor into the cave. I told Golden Feather of Flame what I last had heard.

"The chieftain, *Tumbuk Ladda*," I ended, "suspects that something is wrong, altogether wrong. And he is very strong in his suspicions. He thinks I have brought all forms of misfortune upon the Poonan. God knows, I have brought misfortunes enough upon you, my bride! But the trouble is that the chieftain says it seems almost as if the Green, Green God were stolen!"

She looked bravely up at me.

"*Ak!*" she said. "Bad—that is very bad. But we must not let them know we fear; we must not act like prisoners, but like potentates. You had better show yourself to the Poonan, my *Raj*. Go to the left-hand entrance, where it will not matter if they enter. Show yourself to them and command them to bring food—we have not eaten since yesterday—and the effect of a command on them will be well."

I nodded, brightening. Surely enough, as she had said, would a command have a good effect upon their suspicious souls. They would either have to lose their suspicions of me enough to obey me, or else they would have to run counter to my command and show that they dared disobey me. But I did not think they would dare disobey me. For I meant to show them, by the arrogance of my command, that I yet was King.

I strode to the left-hand entrance. A group of men passing up the avenue, at that moment, saw me; and all in that moment, their faces went long and stiff, as though chiseled in stone, and as though they themselves were turned completely into stone, they stood stock-still, fascinated.

I knew then. Still was I to them the Man-Child of Genghis Khan, whom they could not help fearing as the destroyer, and whom they could not help kowtowing to as their King. For of a sudden, they got some control of their surprise, and down to the ground nine times they bowed.

In the while that they were bowing other groups happening to pass, saw me and joined in the bowing; and in that while, after I had given them plenty of time to bow to me and thus take to heart the awe of my position, I said:

"Quick, some of you! Bring food. Bring water. Bring torches for my cave this night. I command it. I, the Man-Child and your King, command it!"

All seemed eager to obey; for the command no sooner had gone forth than all turned and sped away. I stood there then, and for a time I was alone. Before me the Jallan Batoe lay baked and empty, like some beautiful oasis after a plague.

But after a time they returned, as many as a round dozen of them—for in numbers is courage. And some bore bundles of long leaves, bunched and prepared as torches; others gourds or *hungs* of sulphur water; while still others bore rattan baskets and wooden platters heaped with steaming meats, *kwe-kwe*, or buttered cakes, baked breadfruit, large *durian* oranges, and the roasted edible seeds of the jackfruit.

They were headed by the Gunner who, despite the strength of his suspicions, seemed to have summoned up sufficient courage to lead them. Slowly, hesitantly, they mounted the nine stone stairs beneath me, and laid the foodstuffs and torches upon the stone threshold at my feet. Then, even to the Gunner, all turned tail, and precipitantly plunged down the stairs and away.

I smiled, picked up what I could of the food and torches and, in several trips, carried all inside the cave. I placed the gourds of water, the wooden platters, and the rattan baskets of food and fruits upon the couch; and then we relaxed our vigilance somewhat, and ate and drank adequately.

We went out together then to the bend in the horseshoe-shaped corridor where lay old *Mohong*. We carried the remainder of the food, still quite a large ration; and we lighted our way with a torch, for the sun was slanting down behind the rim of the crater by now, and our cave was darkening rapidly.

Now long before this I had thought of explaining the case in its entirety to old *Mohong*. I had thought to tell him how *Lip-Plak-Tengga* had duped me into receiving the god from her hands in order that the Poonan, once they learned it was in my possession, should rise up and whelm me over, and thereby work out for her both a revenge and a balm for my having refused her love; I had thought to tell him that Golden Feather of Flame and I honestly meant to return the god to the *Dobo* and, to that end, sincerely were striving; and I had thought to tell him that, most of all, we did not want the Poonan to know the true posture of affairs until that posture of affairs was thoroughly righted—the god returned to the *Dobo* and everything, once more, as it had been.

But one look now at his slits of eyes glowing in the torch-light, black and old and malicious as a snake's, and I paused to reconsider my thought. The man hated me. He hated me as poisonously and consumingly as nitric acid hates an engraver's copper.

He thought I had stolen the Green, Green God from the *Dobo*. He believed that slowly but inevitably the Green, Green God was coming to life; and with a terrific apprehension born of that horrible legend, he feared the misfortunes that unalterably must follow. All this, it was his merciless religion to believe and dread. And with an awful dread he believed that in another day, perhaps—surely not more than a moon—the god would fly screaming at him, peck at his back, rob him of his heart, rob him of all life.

And he wanted to live. He was an old man, true; but in no one is the desire to live so strong as in the old. He wanted to live.

I was the cause therefore, the indirect cause, but still the cause, of all his religious dreads and awful terrors. He would not listen to my explanations. It mattered not to him how I had come into possession of the god. To him it only mattered, solely mattered, that I had in my unrightful keeping a dread god, and that that dread god was arousing momentarily to life. To him my possession of that dread god was tantamount to meaning the end of his life, the end of all life in the Jallan Batoe—the end of the whole world!

He would not listen to me. He was an old man with an old man's fixedness of idea. And he had but one idea now. He hated me with a rancor that was whole-souled, deep-seated, intolerable and malignant.

Wherefore, I did not tell old *Mohong*. And yet I knew that just as soon as we removed the gag from his withered mouth in order to allow him to eat, just so soon would he scream out. We left the removal of that gag till the last. We eased the rattan bindings from about his wrists and arms. Then, finally, we took out the gag.

I had expected him to scream, I repeat; and yet when he did scream now, I jumped in every nerve of me. For he was screaming shrilly:

"The Man-Child has stolen the god! The Man-Child has stolen the Green, Green God! It will come to life, it will come——"

With both hands I grasped his reedy windpipe. I held him tight by that windpipe, tighter, tighter——

And then, wholly suddenly, upon my ears burst the sunset singing of the stones.

I released my hands from about his stringy neck.

"Now yell!" I shouted grimly. I shouted to make myself heard in all that thrum and hum of the stone about our ears.

But he only wheezed and choked, and looked at me with slits of eyes that were black and old and venomous as a snake's. He knew it would be worse than useless to scream now amid all that shaking sound in the air; he knew he never would be heard. So sullenly, therefore, he fell to eating.

Ere that wail of the Men-Who-Would-Have-Been had ceased as abruptly as it had commenced, we gagged old *Mohong* once more and trussed him up as tightly as he had been. Then we left him in the corridor—a black bundle with flashing eyes—and went back with our shaky light into the great cave-chamber.

I placed three of the prepared torches in sockets in the walls, and lighted them from the flame of the torch in my hand. And then, as I was placing that torch in my hand into a wall-socket, my bride came to my side and leaned softly against me and reached up her little hand to my beard; and thus, gently pulling my head down by that beard, she kissed me upon the mouth. Softly thereupon she whispered:

"Let us make the venture early this night, my *Raj*. Let us take that which is in the basket and go with it to the *Dobo* at once. Yes; at once, my *Raj*, for we have no time to lose."

CHAPTER XXVII

HOW HYDE SAW THAT WHICH WAS ABROAD IN THE NIGHT

WE CAME out to the right-hand entrance, my wife and I; and, just as on the night prior, in my belt was that long .38 on its .45-frame, and under my left arm was that basket containing the Green, Green God.

Outside, with tropic swiftness, night had shut down upon the Jallan Batoe, as if in fancy, some great peacock, perched upon a jagged tooth of the rim of the crater far above, had spread of a sudden its wings over all. And velvety purple as a peacock's breast was that vast O of sky overhead.

I led the way. And I led the way not by the circuitous route we had pursued the night before. I was determined now to make a quick and bold try at returning the Green, Green God. Wherefore, I led the way straight down the Avenue of Palms, under shadow of those palms on the one hand and under shadow of the stones and growths on the other.

Though I knew, for a certainty, that the Poonan did not know as yet that the God was gone from the *Dobo*, yet my nerves were drawn to such a tension by the events which had occurred that day and the night before, that I often fancied now I saw and heard strange things in the purple dark.

It seemed to me, as we passed close by open cultivated fields, that everywhere among the growths were there eyes watching me; it seemed to me that dark shapes flitted to either side of us, beneath the shadows of the palms, and concealed themselves behind the trunks; and once I caught the sound of a crackling leaf, as if, indeed, some one prowling in the dark, had stepped upon that leaf. But without any real misadventure, we put the Elephant Stone far behind us.

And now, quick rising, a scared-looking moon sailed over the wall of the crater. In a trice, thereupon, the Jallan Batoe became almost as light as day. The Avenue of Palms lay white as a ribbon of silver ahead, and ahead, at its end, uprose before us the tremendous shape of the half horse, half woman of the Stone *Dobo*.

But the Stone *Dobo* did not glow with that incandescent brightness lent by many torches flickering inside. There were no torches flickering inside. Inside, within its white, white stone walls and paneled doors, there was only Plutonian gloom.

And still, withal, that Stone *Dobo* looked coldly white and sublime; for bathed in the effulgence of the moon, as it was, its white stone shape in that luster, was like an eminence robed in snow. The half horse, half woman, so marvelously carved, seemed almost alive. Indeed, in that luster, the long curved stony lips of that woman seemed to be smiling a smile as mysterious and inscrutable as that of the Sphinx.

Now before that huge cave-temple was a broad open space of avenue, bathed in moonlight, and sweeping up to that great flight of stairs, which were as a white cascade in the moonwash. I had halted in the shadow of a palm near the very end of the line of palms; I wanted to gather myself ere making a dash across that open moon-swept space. And now, as I waited, crept to my side my bride, Golden Feather of Flame.

"The *Dobo* is dark within," she whispered. "That is well. There is no one inside. And we will soon be inside, my *Raj*. We will rid ourselves soon of that which is in the basket, and then we will be at ease. But let us not pause; let us go boldly on. Everything depends on the next few minutes."

Her words were heartening words to me; for if she, who was as brave as she was beautiful, thought nothing of the breathless dash we should have to make across that open moon-washed space, there surely seemed no reason why I should hesitate. I freshened my grip on the basket under my arm, on that revolver in my belt; then on toward the end of the line of palms and that open sweep beyond, I started.

WELL, as I did, on the sudden, from behind one of the few remaining palms, stepped out a woman dressed in a fawn-colored leopard skin, spotted with black mottlings, and clinging so tightly to her feline form that it seemed sewn upon her. Against that moon-washed background of stone and avenue, she stood motionless, distinct as a statue carved in onyx, her hair rippling blue-black about her shoulders, her eyes dark and lustrous, and her face white in the moonlight, so that it seemed of a ghastly pallor. *Lip-Plak-*

Tengga, the High Priestess, it was, surely enough; and she stood thus before us as if to bar our way.

But she could not bar our way now, with the achievement of our purpose so near at hand. I did not pause. Startled though I was by her unexpected, her even dramatic appearance, I did not pause. I drew close to her.

She lifted her golden arms, glinting with those platinum bands, to either side, level with her shoulders, as if indeed to bar our way. In a voice that I thought was pitched unnaturally loud—as if for the sole purpose that others beside ourselves might hear—she said:

"*Ahê!*" You have come. To put back the Green, Green God you stole, you have come!"

It was not a question. It was a statement, a denunciation. It was slowly uttered, carefully and clearly enunciated. It was said, in short and to repeat, in such a manner that others beside ourselves might hear.

I peered about me in the shadows of the palms, now to the right, now to the left. I saw no one. Yet in a voice that others beside ourselves might hear—if they were listening—I said:

"We have come; yes. We have come to put back that which you, *Lip-Plak-Tengga*, stole from the *Dobo!* Now out of our way, out of our way, you she-cat!" And I made to walk on.

But she swung her arms before her and extended them toward me. Her wickedly slanting eyes blazed; her eyes blazed with a look of hate that was enough to burn and sear one. And she whispered sibilantly:

"Listen, white man. Three times you cast me aside and more than three times. You smote me; you spat upon me; you heaped offal upon my head—*Ahê!* upon the head of *Lip-Plak-Tengga*, High Priestess of the Poonan, who is too high for any Poonan to kiss, to whom the Poonan may never hope to attain. You did all that; but now—now I have you in my fingers! In my fingers I have you, I say, and I will wring all life from you—so!"

And she clenched and worked her slim fingers together as if between them she were wringing out some wet rag.

But I laughed at her. I was altogether unafraid. I was used to her threats by now; and I felt, if all she could do was to threaten me there was no good reason now for me to be afraid of her. I made determinedly to stride past her. But again her hands stopped me; only this time and firmly they were pressed against my chest.

"Stop! Step not a step nearer!" she cried stridently. "You must obey! *Ahê!* You must obey; for I, *Lip-Plak-Tengga*, command it and I, *Lip-Plak-Tengga*, must be obeyed. I can crush you at any hour with a single word!"

"Damme!" I swore. "Do you think your threats will stop me now with that *Dobo* but a jump away. Do you, do you!" I choked with rage. "I'll show you!" I exploded, and savagely I brushed aside her hands.

I was wild at the idea that she should think her threats could thwart us, and we so near to the end of our desperate errand. I was wild with a Berserker rage. I did not care, then, if there *were* Poonan lurking in the shadows of the palms. I had a gun and I could get them. I could get some of them—six of them anyway—ere they got me.

I lifted my right foot to step toward her, but I put that foot down, suddenly, halfway in its natural stride. My bride's frantic fingers were on my arm, pulling me back with the strength of some abnormal fear. Her frantic whisper was in my ears:

"Do you not see—do you not see It! There, there—behind her—in the shadow of those palms!"

I looked. Behind *Lip-Plak-Tengga*, in the black shadow of a clump of palms, surely enough, I saw something—a man. No; not a man either; only a man's head. The body of that man was completely enveloped in the black concealing shadow cast by the thick plumes and stout trunks of those palms, and nothing of him was visible, save and except the head that was thrust out from the cloaking darkness into the moonlight.

That head loomed above my head, as I stood there erect and tense, just as my head had loomed above the heads of the squat Poonan. But he was no Poonan. He was taller than I; to judge from the height of his extended head, he was over seven feet tall—preposterously tall. And yet his head was not such a large head; it was but little larger than my head; indeed, for such a preposterously tall man, it was a small head.

Thrust out on a thick neck from the blackness of the palms, the face was only an inky smudge in the uncertain moonlight; but the outline of the head was a bit more distinct. That head was turned not toward me but toward *Lip-Plak-Tengga*. It was in profile; and therefore, profiled as it was against that white background of moon-washed space and stone, it was like a silhouette cut in black paper.

And just as with a silhouette, just so could I remark, after a fashion, the outline of most of the features of that head. And every feature of that head, which I could remark, seemed simian in characteristics, negroid, bestial, and primordial.

The brow swept so sharply back from a protuberant brush of eyebrows there seemed to be no brow at all. The top of the head was flat, perfectly flat; it fell away to the neck without bulge, without curve, if, indeed, it was only an elongation of that neck which had thickened and swelled, and somehow, as symmetrically, formed into frontal features.

And those frontal features! The eyes little and glittering; the jaws prognathous as a baboon's; the nose a simous smudge, flat and wide-nostriled, like a negro's; and the high cheek-bones and thick protruding lips, all just like a negro's. In fact, though there were simian features about that profile, there were more features—in nose and cheek-bones, glittering eyes and protruding lips—characteristic of the profile of a negro. And that whole profile was black, as I said; black against that wash of moonlighted background—a thick deep black, as if the skin of his face were the skin of a negro.

"But *is* he a negro?" the doubt flashed through my mind. "Surely not a negro from Africa, for how could he come to be here in the heart of Borneo? No; if he is a negro at all he is one of the blacks from the islands adjacent to Borneo—New Guinea, perhaps—and he wandered into the Jallan Batoe somehow years before."

I did not know quite what to think, and I was thinking quickly, furiously. The blacks of New Guinea are a small race, I knew, a pigmy race; and yet this man seemed gigantic in height. Though his body was out of sight, hidden by the palm-trunks, hidden by the concealing shadows, he was gigantic in height, to judge from the loftiness of his extended head. The only conclusion I could reach was that he was a paradox, a monstrosity, who had been born, strangely, in a pigmy race.

"Such monstrosities do occur," I said with certitude, "especially among races but slightly removed from the brute. And he is such a monstrosity. He is an abysmal black."

But I was wrong; I was horribly wrong. He was a more terrible monstrosity than any abysmal black. He was something nastier!

I did not know that then. I only knew that he was the slave to *Lip-Plak-Tengga*. And I felt that he was the slave to her—a colossal man, the slave to the will of a feline yet comparatively frail woman—because, as I knew was usual with such monstrosities, he was either brutish as an animal of the wilds, or else dull-witted, lack-witted.

And surely enough, his head for such a huge body was, as I said, small, meager, dwarfed. That, and the shape of it—or better, the lack of shape of it—showed that he lacked wits as well. And his eyes, now glittering out of the shadow from under their beetling bunches of eyebrow, were little and round and shiny as buttons; brutish, brainless eyes; eyes little and round, and malignantly shiny as a snake's.

I looked at him. He never moved, never blinked an eye. So, as I looked, slowly and covertly, my right hand dropped down to that heavy .38 in my belt. He was the Monster Man. But Monster Man, though he was, he was now not nearly so dreadful a sight as had been the vague vision of his lurching terrible shape behind the old, old rug, or that feel in the dark of his huge hairy soft-palmed hand.

To me now he was only a black, even though a gigantic monstrosity of a black. He was only some repulsive thing to be shot down like a mad dog in the road, to be crushed under heel like a slimy snake.

With a sudden steeling of nerve and purpose, an incredibly swift action, I swung up my right hand. In that right hand was my long .38; and tightening upon the trigger of that .38, as my arm swung up, was my index finger.

But I never shot. Indeed I no more than got that nine-inch barrel fully drawn from my belt; for my arm was stopped midway, ere completely it swung up. And it was not the High Priestess who stopped my arm with such panicky haste. It was my bride, my beautiful Golden Feather of Flame.

"Don't! Oh, don't!" she whispered, her voice indescribable with a kind of horror.

"Don't use your knife! Don't move a step nearer! Don't do anything, any——"

"But this is no knife!" I breathed excitedly. And as excitedly I tried to free my arm. "Don't stop me, don't stop me, my bride! You do not know. I will kill him! With one shot, I will kill him!"

She released my arm, but only to clutch wildly at my shirt, at my shoulders. She clutched at me convulsively, as if in the agitation of sudden weakness.

"I am afraid!" she breathed. "You can not kill him! No one can kill him! And I am afraid—I weaken—I am afraid of the Monster Man!" And her hands dropping limply from me, her golden head sagging forlornly, down to the ground at my feet she slipped.

The gun slid back into my belt. A great fear upon me—fear for her and her alone—quickly I stooped above her.

"Go back!" vibrated a voice in my ear. "I told you you were a fool. Now you know you are a fool. You can not return the Green, Green God. You can never return the Green, Green God. Go back. For never will the Green, Green God be returned to the Stone *Dobo* until the Poonan know, and rise up and kill you! I, the High Priestess of the Poonan, say that; and I but bide my time. Go back, you fool, for I spare you tonight."

But I paid no heed to that High Priestess; I paid no heed to that motionless Monster Man behind her. All I knew then was that Golden Feather of Flame was at my feet, had fainted dead away at my feet—my wife, my own, my beautiful and brave.

I picked up her poor limp form. Upon *Lip-Plak-Tengga* then and upon her hideous monstrosity, I turned my back. One edge of that rattan basket crushed between my teeth, my wife limp in my arms, on I went, straight up that avenue down which, but a few minutes before so hopefully we had come.

I stumbled into the Elephant Cave, my wife faintly stirring now in my arms. Stumbling over charred torches upon the floor I laid her gently upon the couch; and consciousness having come back to her fully now, she lay there, shivering and weeping with weakness and fear.

"Another time!" she sobbed. "Only another time! We will bring back the Green, Green God tomorrow—tomorrow night!"

Her words were brave words, but I hardly heard them. I was looking at the floor, looking fearfully at the floor. Four torches burned above my head in the sockets in the walls; I remembered having placed those torches there, but I never remembered having thrown these other charred torches upon that floor. There were two, there were three; and one still smoked faintly, and one still glowed a dull red. Some one had been in the cave. Some one had been in the cave but a short time before.

A subtle suspicion fired my brains. I leaped to one of the torches in the walls and that torch casting shaky shadows, dashed out into the dark corridor. In that corridor, in the pitchy bend, there was no silent black bundle with flashing eyes—no bound heap of bones and skin and hate—no *Mohong Wook* at all. The old *Adjie*, with all his knowledge of us, was gone.

I knew then. The Poonan had come for old *Mohong*. They had cut his bonds, pulled that gag from his withered mouth. And the Poonan knew now. They knew, from old *Mohong*, that the Green, Greed God was gone from the *Dobo*. They knew that we had the Green, Green God in our Elephant Cave. And they would come, now, for us.

CHAPTER XXVIII

WHEN THE POONAN ROSE

BUT they did not come. The moments slipped into minutes, the minutes into hour-fractions, and the hour-fractions at last into the fullness of a whole hour of waiting. And they did not come.

In the dark of that great cave-chamber—for I had beaten out the torches against the walls—we sat upon the couch, my wife and I, side by side. The rattan basket containing the Green, Green God was in *Belun-Mea Poa-Poa's* lap; the heavy .38 was held tightly in my right hand, its long barrel pointing toward that low doorway. Thus we waited. And we waited thus, because it was the only thing we could think of doing.

We waited for the muffled tread of bare feet in the grassy avenue, the soft flop of bare feet upon the stone stairs of the entrances. It was a torture of waiting. The suspense was on us like thumb-screws. I wanted, dearly wanted, to cry:

"Come on, you golden rats! I hear you out there! Come on, —— you, and finish us quick!"

But outside the moon-bathed night was without stir, silent as the dead. No bare feet trod through the muffling grass of the avenue, no bare feet flopped upon the moon-washed stairs. It was a soundless night—like a night before Adam when only gigantic, fat worms lifted their dumb, blind heads in a great gray world of slime and ooze. The Poonan did not come.

I leaped up and paced the floor. I paced back and forth, back and forth, but always I paced close to that low doorway, the revolver ready in my right hand. The moments snailed slowly by—black within the cave, ghostly with moonlight and quietude outside in the night. And all the while, as I paced now, an idea, born of desperation, obsessed me.

If only I could return the Green, Green God that night, all might be well. I might forestall the Poonan—it might not yet be too late—and then we could live on, my wife and I, as King and Queen of the Poonan; as King and Queen of our paradise on earth.

I halted beside the couch. Impulsively I grabbed up Golden Feather of Flame, caught her in my arms, and kissed her passionately, again and again, upon the mouth.

"Wait for me here—I am going, my bride," I said. "Alone and single-handed, I am going to return the Green, Green God this night. *Nda, nda!*" as bravely she made to rise. "You must not accompany me. You are too weak with fright and fear to accompany me, so weak that your presence would prove a hindrance to me. And I can not chance being hindered now, my bride. I must return the God this night. Perhaps it is not too late. *Lip-Plak-Tengga* never will think I will try again tonight. But I will! I will return the Green, Green God tonight!"

Yet did she cling to me, sobbing her fears for me, holding me back. Gently I freed myself, forced her down upon the couch, and caught up the rattan basket. She lay, now, with her face hidden in her arms, her whole form shaking with slow, silent sobs. I put my revolver into her little hand and closed those dear fingers about the butt.

"I will return to you soon, my Golden Feather of Flame," I said reassuringly; then grimly: "But if they should come before I return, use that—use that, holding it as you have seen me hold it. Turn this long cold end away from you—so. Press with your first finger on this—this trigger. There will be a loud sound, a spit of flame, a jump all along your arm. But do not be frightened; do not fear. That loud sound and all will scare them, if it does not kill them—one of them, anyway!"

I was out of the Elephant Cave then, leaving her alone in the dark. But I was not abandoning her—far from it. She would be, in this venture, not a help but a hindrance to me. And alone and singlehanded, I was making, then, a last and most desperate attempt to return the Green, Green God, so that everything once more might be well. It was all up to me.

And this was no time now to go a roundabout way, no time even to go skulking under the shadows of palms and growths. This was a tragic time, a most desperate time when that which I would do I must do swiftly, boldly. I was a man alone now, a white man.

With the inevitable boldness of the white man in the face of overwhelming odds, full down the moon-lighted middle of that Avenue of Palms toward the Stone *Dobo*, I started running.

No one stopped me. No sentry barred my way with the gaping muzzle of a long *sumpitan;* no Poonan ran ahead shouting an alarm into the night. Save the sound of my own quick footfalls, there was no sound at all in the night.

And then the tattoo of my footfalls ceased, as I halted abruptly; for all of a sudden, as on a flutter of wind, a great sound had rolled to my ears. I stood now, suddenly tense and very still. And I looked ahead.

QUITE a distance ahead, but plainly distinct in the open sweep of the avenue, the brightness of the moon, bulked the huge Stone *Dobo*. And it was lighted up now. It was glowing white with the incandescence of a thousand torches blazing inside, shining out through its innumerable slits, and reflecting upon its white, white stone!

I realized in a flash then. There could be but one meaning to all those torches. The Poonan were gathered within!

Even as I realized that, I noted a little black huddle of the Poonan clustered upon the top of that white cascade which was the *Dobo* stairs. They were clustered about the arched doorway of that *Dobo* like a swarm of flies about a treacle-barrel's spigot.

There was a vast multitude of the Poonan within that *Dobo*, to judge from that; perhaps every man and woman in the Jallan Batoe; a multitude so very vast, in fact, that the *Dobo* could not house them all, and so some, of necessity, had overflowed out upon that white cascade of stairs.

They had gathered silently enough, like so many golden rats, those Poonan; but now that they were gathered, they no longer were so silent. That sound which first had halted me was repeated now in my ears. A ground-shaking swell of sound, it was, like the boom of an organ. But it was no boom of organ. It was the sound of men's angry voices—a deep, ominous, menacing sound.

They had discovered, of course, that the Green, Green God was gone from the *Dobo*. Old *Mohong* had told them, or maybe *Lip-Plak-Tengga*; but, either way, gathered as they now were in the *Dobo*, they could see for themselves that the Green, Green God was gone from that *Dobo*. And that was the meaning of that menacing swell of sound. They knew!

Like a rush of blood to my head, an insane thought fired my brains. What if I should march boldly into that *Dobo*, into that vast multitude, and return the god for all the world as though I, as King and Man-Child, had the divine right to take and return it. Of a certainty I knew that if ever I could get up upon that lofty Nine-Times-Nine Throne, I could outface all the Poonan, prevail against them, dominate them —in the end, cause them all to cower and cringe before me.

But the trouble was, I never could get into that *Dobo*—let alone, up upon that lofty throne—alive. There were the Poonan upon the top of the stairs. They would not make way for me. They would pull the god from my hands, ere I got into that *Dobo*. With a hundred hands, with that merciless brutality bred of awful fear, they would tear me to bits, pluck my limbs right out of me, mash me into repulsiveness, grind me under heel into a nothingness, unspeakable and vile!

I turned around, and like one possessed, back the way I had come, I sped. Once I looked back. The Poonan were issuing from the doorway of that *Dobo*. They were pouring down that cascade of stairs like flies down a stream of milk. And once at the bottom of those stairs, they were swinging up the avenue. They were heading for the Elephant Cave. They were running!

I ran. Dread sped my legs. Dread of the Poonan. Dread for *Belun-Mea Poa-Poa*, left alone in the darkness of the Elephant Cave. The Poonan had not seen me yet; perhaps I could reach that cave and *Belun-Mea Poa-Poa* ere they did see me. At the top of my speed I ran.

From the right-hand side of the avenue, suddenly, came a low cry. I halted, with a sharp clutching of breath, and edged away. And then, from the shadow of one of the palm-trees which lined that side of the avenue, my long .38 glinting in her hand, came forth my own Golden Feather of Flame.

I dropped that rattan basket into the softness of the grassy avenue, and in my arms I caught her as, with a little choking sob, she rushed toward me.

"My wife!" I exclaimed. "You—you followed me?"

"I could not help it," she sobbed. "Oh, I could not help following you, *Raj*. I was afraid for you—afraid that they might come upon you and close about you, and I not be near to die with——"

"Hush, hush, my brave one! They are coming now. They know we have the god. They are coming to the Elephant Cave."

She gave a little frightened cry, then looking swiftly behind, even as I spoke, she saw them. They were like a black flood sweeping up the moon-bathed avenue, and like the muttering that comes from a swirling black flood, so there came from them now a continuous distance-dulled roar.

She grasped my right hand bravely.

"*Tung moolong!*" she breathed. "We must run for the tunnel, the outside!"

"But they will have it guarded!" I objected in a rush of apprehension. "*Lip-Plak-Tengga*—she will have it guarded!"

"We do not know, we can not know, we can only try. There is no other way, *Raj*. In that way only is there hope. Before they come we may reach that tunnel. They may not have thought to guard it. Come!"

And she made to rush on. But I halted her to stoop down and pick up that rattan basket.

"My revenge!" I cried. "If ever we make that outer world, ——! We'll make it with the Green, Green God!"

Like a far away baying of hounds came

to me then, distinct upon a breathing of wind, the shouts of that mob.

"*Hee-ah! Hee-ah!*" the shouts came; and again: "*Hee-ah! Hee-ah!*"

That was the war-cry of the Poonan which echoes through interminable distance of windless air. And it was an exultant war-cry now. It was more like the view halloo of a fox-pack when the object of the chase is sighted.

And the Poonan had sighted us. That was the reason for those exultant war-cries. Standing as we were, out in that moon-drenched stretch of avenue the Poonan had sighted us!

But we stood there no longer. Hand in hand, onward up that avenue, we ran and ran.

We were running thus past the Elephant Stone when, of a sudden, I had an idea.

"This way!" I cried sharply, and frantically pulling Golden Feather of Flame by the hand, I drew her, stumbling and breathing quickly, to the foot of the left-hand stairs.

But we did not mount those stairs. We went past those stairs. We went around and behind that Elephant Stone.

I desired to throw the Poonan off the track. I wanted them to think we had entered the Elephant Cave. Burdened as I was with the Green, Green God, and as was Golden Feather of Flame with that heavy revolver and the flapping folds of her silken robe, the Poonan were gaining considerably on us—gaining on us like a great straggling flood. But they had seen us, no doubt, dart from the avenue toward the Elephant Stone, and I hoped now that they would pause to search for us within the Elephant Stone.

There was no waiting at that you may be sure, to determine the success of the move. Leading Golden Feather of Flame by the hand I made quickly through a brake of slender sugar-cane which hedged the Elephant Stone about on the left-hand side. And Golden Feather of Flame followed where I led, blindly, unquestioningly, obediently. She trusted me, during that tragic time, as a child trusts some one it loves very much.

At the rear of the Elephant Stone we faced about toward the head of the crater or valley where, far above in the moon-silvered night, the nearest lava wall of the crater slanted down from the sky like a great spill of ink. Hurriedly, hand in hand, we made, my wife and I, for that nearest lava wall.

The way was now much like that roundabout way we had pursued, but the night before, in our first attempt to return the Green, Green God. It lay between the rear of the stones that faced on the Avenue of Palms and the rear of the stones that faced on the Avenue of Camphor Trees. Only this tragic time we were not headed toward the Stone *Dobo*, we were not trying to return the Green, Green God. We were headed now toward that sunken lava path, and that tunnel through the wall of the crater; we were trying to win to the outer world with the Green, Green God, and with our lives.

From that brake of sugar-cane we clambered over a rude fence of rattans, and made through a broad patch spiked with the tall leaves of some form of tobacco. We were moving quickly beneath the gigantic leaves of a walk of bananas, just beyond that tobacco patch when there burst upon our ears, once again, the cries of the Poonan.

High and shrill cries they were; eager, most eager cries. They were a clamor of cries, like that which goes up from a fox-pack when they run the fox to hole. I comprehended in a vivid flash the reason for those eager cries.

The mob of Poonan had reached the Elephant Stone. They thought they had driven us in the Elephant Stone. In that vivid flash of comprehension I almost could see them crowding up both staircases, sweeping through the entrances, lighting torches, and searching the corridor and the huge cave-chamber within.

But there was no time to lose. They would soon determine that we were not at bay in that Elephant Stone; and right then would they realize that we were making a dash for the tunnel and the outside.

We pressed on. We pressed on through an area waving with jungle maize; then through a crudely-scraped field, upon the ruffled, moon-lighted surface of which tiny seeds were sparkling like dewdrops; and then through a waste overgrown with *cogon* grass, taller than myself.

That sunken lava path began, you remember, at the head of the Avenue of Palms, and cut deeply through a rise of jungled ground. Well, it was after we had hurried through the waste of rustling *cogon* grass that we realized we had neared that rise of jungled ground. For a little distance ahead of us then, rolled up a jungle of lush growths, and ferns, creepers, and gigantic trees.

We faced about, therefore, toward the Avenue of Palms to our right. Leaving the waste of tall *cogon* grass, and skirting the edge of that jungle, we sloshed almost knee-deep through a soggy rice-paddy, and then through a thicket of low sago palms, and opium poppies. We came out at last near the head of the Avenue of Palms.

As we did a myriad of shouts crashed upon our ears. They were the bellowing shouts of men angered by being outwitted. Looking back, down that moon-bathed stretch of avenue, a fleeting glance showed us the Poonan sweeping out of either entrance of the Elephant Stone, dashing down the stairs, and surging and swirling around the base of that stone like so many hounds that had lost the scent of the quarry.

They were aware now that we were not at bay in that Elephant Cave. In another moment, I knew, they would become aware that we were making a desperate attempt to reach that tunnel in the crater wall. And if we would win to that tunnel and the outside with the Green, Green God and with our lives, of a surety, there was no time to lose.

"Here," I said quickly to my wife. "Take this basket and give me the revolver. They may overtake us before we can reach that tunnel. If so I'll need the revolver."

She gave me the revolver without a word, and I gave her the rattan basket to carry. It was burdening her heavily, true; but at that tragic time it seemed necessary, well-nigh compulsory. I must have my hands free so that, if the need arose, I could fight for her; and of a certainty, both as a gun and as a club, there was much that I could do with the .38.

I snatched her free hand. Then up the avenue toward that rise of overgrown earth and that sunken lava path I led the way at a terrific pace. And with all her strength, all her will, and her bravery, Golden Feather of Flame followed, breathing hard, but ever close at my side.

We darted in a trice into that lava path between its shoulder-high walls of earth. And all in that trice, from that mob of Poonan behind, rose a mad yell.

"*Tung moolong!*" it resounded through the crater. "To the tunnel, to the tunnel!"

CHAPTER XXIX

AND HOW HYDE AT LAST CAME TO CLOSE QUARTERS WITH THAT WHICH WAS ABROAD IN THE NIGHT

NOW, whether it was from the terror inspired by that inevitable discovery of the Poonan, or from the weight of the Green, Green God she carried, I do not know. But on the sudden, as we turned a bend in that scooped-out path, and in so doing shut out all sight of that pursuing mob, Golden Feather of Flame slipped weakly to her knees.

I stopped and lifted her to her feet. With the action—just that quickly—I changed my mind about allowing her to burden herself with the Green, Green God.

"Give me the god!" I said hurriedly. "Give me the god, and I'll carry both it and the gun."

"*Nda, nda!*" she cried bravely, and as bravely started on again. "I wish to carry the god. I have a reason, *Raj*. Let only me carry the god."

It was no time to question her about her motives. I could hear that mob of Poonan, far behind, but coming nearer; their sharp cries, their eager cries; their cries so like the baying of hounds at the kill. We ran hand in hand along that deep-sunken lava path.

And yet the feeling was mine, as my wife struggled courageously to keep up with me, that willingly she was carrying that heavy basket in order to help conserve my strength for that final struggle with the Poonan which, she must have thought, inevitably would come. It was a noble, self-sacrificing motive, surely; and yet, had I but known it, how even more noble, how supremely more sacrificial was her real motive!

But I did not know that then, of course. I only knew that with the cries of those Poonan winging louder to our ears, we were running, madly running, along that lava path.

To either side of our shoulders atop the banks of that lava path loomed, as we ran along, that tangled labyrinth of trees and lush growths which I had noted when first I had entered the Jallan Batoe. And now, just as I had noted when first I had entered the Jallan Batoe, just so I noted quite suddenly, along the bank nearest to me, a movement in those growths.

I kept my eyes upon that right-hand bank as we ran along. And right along with us it went—that movement in the growths.

There was a swish from the ferns, a pull on a creeper where others close at hand were loose and still, and a swaying of branches here, then immediately ahead, and all to the soft accompaniment of rustling leaves and lianas.

I could see no one. The moonbeams, striking straight down into the path, silvered those trees and growths; but still, so thick they were and so entangled that I could see no one. And yet, not three feet from our heads, running beside us with a swiftness marvelous in that network of huge roots and lush, there was, I knew, some one. For once I heard a twig snap as under the foot of some prowling animal, and once again a pebble, dislodged from the edge of the bank, rolled down with a gathering of earth to my very feet.

"Some Poonan!" I thought in a kind of flurry. "Some Poonan has caught up with us!"

A pull on my arm caused me to remove my eyes from that right-hand bank and look around, hastily, at my wife. But she was not looking at that right-hand bank—the movement along that bank had stopped abruptly, anyhow, as if that prowler in the night had paused with us. She was looking straight ahead, and her eyes were dilated as with some great and horrid surprise.

I looked ahead. And ahead, gaping black in the moonlight, I saw the mouth of that tunnel through the rock and lava-wall of the crater. And standing directly before that gaping black hole, that tawny bespotted leopard-skin outlining her feline form I saw *Lip-Plak-Tengga*, the High Priestess!

Even as I saw her her slant eyes met mine with a flaming, triumphant look.

"*Ahe!*" she cried loudly. "Not the Man-Child, not our King, only a white man! Only a white man, striving to steal the Green, Green God, striving to save his cowardly neck!"

Her voice was so loud it was like a signal to that mob of Poonan behind us. And I felt thereat that she thought to stop us now—to stop us even at that threshold of our escape. I freshened my grip upon my revolver and, my body tensed, took a step forward toward her.

"Out of my way!" I shouted boldly. "Out of my way, *Lip-Plak-Tengga*. You can never stop us now!"

But that lone figure in the clinging leopard-skin did not move.

"Only a white man!" she cried out again. "Not the Man-Child, not our King, only a white man!"

Sure then her words were a signal, dragging *Belun-Mea Poa-Poa* by the hand, I leaped forward.

"Then on your own head be it!" I shouted madly, and I raised my revolver.

But a sudden unaccountable move upon her part caused my finger to hesitate even as it tightened upon the trigger. For, altogether suddenly, she outstretched both hands toward the right-hand bank and pleadingly, yet shrilly, she called:

"Man! Man!"

Only there was this difference: She called the Poonan word for man—"*Orang! Orang!*" And from that, and that alone, I should have known what manner of man she was calling.

But I did not know. I swung 'round. A tremendous crackling and rending of growths came from behind and above me. I knew that some one on the right-hand bank was breaking a way through. And then I heard a cry from my wife, a terrible cry:

"The Monster Man! It's the Monster Man!" And she tore her hand from my hand, and the Green, Green God in her arms, clutched to her fear-chilled breasts, she went running back along the sunken path—back the very way we had come.

"I return the God!" she cried. "Look, *Lip-Plak-Tengga*—I return the God! Spare us! Oh, spare us! Spare us—from the Monster Man!"

I started after her, calling her back.

"Stop!" I shouted, shocked, almost unbelieving. "Stop, or everything is lost!"

But she continued on, continued running back into the Jallan Batoe. She knew. Everything was lost.

And now I knew. For now in the path before me, between *Belun-Mea Poa-Poa* and me, uprose on his huge legs to dispute that path with me—the Monster Man! He had leaped down from that right-hand bank. And he was a monster man. But not a negro, not a monstrosity of a black. He was a man of the jungle, a huge orang-outang, a gigantic, colossal ape!

Upreared upon his short, huge and hairy legs, he stood facing me full in the center of that path and full in the moonlight. I could see him plainly—his little round eyes glittering snakily from under bushy brows, his head rolling on a thick neck from side to side, and his whole immense body a dull smear of shaggy hair, black as a negro's skin.

ON HIS body that shaggy hair was fully, in each separate black strand, a foot long; but on his head the, hair was no more than three inches long; while on his face, save for the bushy brows, there was no hair at all. His face, a simous smudge, was bare of hair, his prognathous chin beardless; his was almost a negro's face. And his head, undeveloped with brains, was small, as I said, dwarfed for so large a body. For his body was three times in depth and breadth the size of a man's body.

Over seven feet tall he was, and five feet wide, and three feet, no less, from back to front. His long, heavy-thewed hairy arms hung down from his high bulging shoulders below the knees, right to his ankles. With his ham-like paws he could touch and sweep the lava floor of the path. And his chest, between those six-foot-long arms was stupendous with hair and with depth and roundness. He was enormous. He must have weighed, all in all, close to a thousand pounds—fully half a ton.

I never saw an ape like that monster man. I never heard of one just like that one. The *Orang Benua*, or head-hunters of the interior of Borneo, have legends of jungle men seven feet tall; but nobody ever has seen apes seven feet tall; and yet—yet here was I facing an ape that was over seven feet tall. He was seven feet four inches tall at the least. Never had I heard of, let alone seen, his like. He was a frightful monstrosity of hugeness.

I halted dead. I faced that monstrous brute without a tail, with no hair on his palms, with ears and eyes and nose so like a man's. My heart thudding against my chest like terrible hammer-strokes, my hand sweating and shaking, quickly, almost unconsciously, I raised my revolver and full at that vast black bulk of brute I fired.

I plugged him in the chest. But what with the preposterous vastness, the tremendous vitality of his bulk, that was no vulnerable spot. I had not wounded him mortally. I had only filled him with sudden pain.

He swayed toward me. His great soft-palmed hands went to his reddening chest. And from between his crunching teeth—in form and number just like a man's—he emitted a single scream, a horrible scream, an almost human scream. It was a scream like the scream of a man in pain; and there is nothing so horrible as the scream of a man in pain.

I leaped back, pressing my finger on the trigger of that revolver.

Screaming and rocking from side to side, one long-armed hand tearing leaves from the bank and attempting to stuff them in the wound, as if to stop the flow of blood, the other reaching out, its long fingers working and gripping like some enormous pincers, he lurched, an ungainly vast black bulk, toward me.

I fired a second time. Then ere I could leap back, ere I could shoot again I was in those long, muscled, hairy arms.

With those six-foot-long arms, those soft-palmed long-fingered hands, he clutched my arms as if he would tear bodily my biceps from my arms. He swept me slap up against his vast hairy bulk of body. He hugged me against his vatlike blood-besmeared chest.

With a snap like the snap of a breaking twig, my right arm broke, in that viselike hug at the forearm. A sharp spasm of pain shot through that broken arm; and the revolver to which I had held with such desperate tenacity even when he first had gripped my arms, fell to the lava floor.

I tried to cry out. But I could not cry out. I could not even breathe. And yet I heard in that awful moment, an echoing exultant "Hee-ah! Hee-ah!" from the Poonan sweeping into the path; and I knew then that they had got my wife, my Golden Feather of Flame!

I caught, amid the echoes of that war-cry but nearer hand, the low mirthless laugh of a woman—the laugh I had come to know so well—the laugh of *Lip-Plak-Tengga*.

And then that indescribable monster gripped me about the middle and his strong sinewy hands sunk into my flesh just above the hips. The balls and long nails of his thumbs reached back almost to my spine; the balls and long nails of his fingers reached around to the pit of my stomach; and those incredibly long fingers gripped the fleshy softness of my abdomen, tight, terrifically tight, like the steel fingers of some powerful pincers. It was torture.

You have seen the marks left on my body by his horrible hands. They are old ragged scars now, weathered by many suns; but still they are deeper than the pit of my umbilicus; and for years they were agonizing wounds.

It was torture, I tell you. Those fingers of him cut through my skin, through my flesh, as if my skin and flesh were the skin and flesh of a soft peach.

I felt he was plucking my nerves right out of my middle, crunching my bones together beneath his gripping fingers; slowly, relentlessly, disemboweling me—squeezing my entrails out through my torn belly as if my torn belly were the torn belly of a frog. It was torture unendurable. I screamed to heaven in unutterable agony.

That scream must have shocked if it did not frighten him. For on the sudden he hurled me from him just as I myself would hurl a rag doll. His six-foot-long arms acting as two tremendous springs, bodily through the air he hurled me.

And my right arm flapping about me like a broken reed, my torn middle downpouring blood over my legs and torso, twenty feet and more through the air I went, clutching space with my left hand, turning head over heels, twisting and screaming.

Full upon my face upon the hard lava floor of that path I fell. And with that shattering of my head against the floor, that excruciating pain from my lacerated and bleeding middle, I went out. I went out; yet as I slipped into unconsciousness, a terrible joy was mine that the unspeakable torture of it all at last was ended.

CHAPTER XXX

OF WHAT HAPPENED OUTSIDE

THE steady drip-drip of water upon my upturned face drew me, at length and slowly, up, up out of the black abyss of death. How much later it was I know not.

I was incredibly weak with loss of blood. I was too weak to move, too weak to open the heavy lids of my eyes, too weak even to roll my head out of that irritating drip-drip of water which fell from the moist foliage overhead.

And yet as I lay there, and that steady drip-drip of water slowly revived me, consciousness of certain things about me crept, in a sort of sequence, into my numbly throbbing brains. I became aware, for one thing, that I no longer was lying upon the hardness of the lava floor of that sunken path. Beneath me and about me I could feel the softness, the wetness of lush. And breathing faintly into my ears was the constant whisper of rustling foliage.

I opened my eyes. But only the heavy upward roll of my lids, the conscious knowledge that I really had made the action, told me that I had opened my eyes. For near and far away all was blackness. I could see no scared-looking moon in the sky; I could see no sky, no thing that was about me, not even that broken arm which throbbed painfully at my torn and now sluggishly bleeding side. It was as black about me as if a tropical storm were afoot.

Still, for all that, I knew where I was. I had sensed where I was when I had felt no longer that hard lava path beneath me, when first I had heard that rustle of the moisture-dripping foliage. I was no longer in the Jallan Batoe. I was on the jungled mountain-slope of the Jallan Batoe. I was outside! Yet how I had come there, why the Poonan had not killed me as I lay completely at their mercy in that sunken lava path—these were marvels I could not explain.

And then came to my ears, as I lay there, a strange far-off murmur in the unseen sky. It neared; it rose into a hum; and, a tremendous squall, it tore through the overgrowth of jungle.

Trees shook their long arms, scraped them wildly together, and bent back and forward, almost sweeping the ground; and branches and long leaves, heavy coconuts and *durian* oranges, flayed from those trees, came thudding about me, went shotting on and on through space with such terrific velocity that, if they struck, they would brain a man. Thunder boomed through the world and, on the heels of it, came the lightning. It split open the black bowl of sky, ripped through the thick plash of foliage overhead and electrified that foliage with green and gold and black.

I made out, in those zigzags of lightning, a gigantean tree, uprooted, lying flat upon the mountainside, and overgrown with noxious growths. Somehow, on hands and knees, I crawled toward it. With my good left hand I tore a way beneath those growths. A tropical storm was indeed afoot. I snuggled, prone, beneath those growths and against that trunk of tree for protection from that tropical storm.

And then came the rain—a black vomit from the heavens which fell steadily, unceasingly, with a great hollow booming sound, with an immense brooding patience and persistency. The black bowl of sky gushed water as if those jagged swords of lightning had, indeed, cleft it in twain; the torn and stripped overgrowth of jungle dripped like a sieve; and the tree-trunk beside me, even the heavy growths above and about turned damp, soggy. The very earth ran in rivulets, in washouts, from beneath me.

So through the blackness, as squall after squall struck the mountainside, shattering with hum and din that monotonous booming of the rain, tearing asunder the overgrowth, ripping up massive trees by their huge roots and seemingly shaking the whole round world, I lay under the wet growths beside that soggy tree, sinking into the jellied earth, wetted through and through.

Only once did I move. I scooped up the black mud beneath me and plastered it about my waist, thus roughly poulticing my lacerated middle, and stopping the bleeding.

When the gray light of dawn was seeping through the wide gaps in that torn arcade overhead the squalls ceased, though the rain still continued to downpour with that great hollow booming. Stiff and pain-racked, and thoroughly soaked I was then, yet I thought only to appease the gnawing of my famished stomach.

I crawled out, picked up an almost green *durian* orange and, because I had no knife and was unable to burst its thick coat with one hand, I broke that thick coat by dint of a deal of hammering against that soggy trunk of tree. Then amid all that drip and boom of the rain, I ate.

That strengthened me—I got afoot. Stumbling, and sometimes falling, but always, somehow, picking myself up and doggedly going on, I made through that dripping chaos of growths down the slant of the slope. And I only hoped that I could make some camp of men—orchid-hunters, big-game-trappers, explorers or what-not—or even the old deserted camp where I had parted from my Dyak boys. If my boys only had left a tarpaulin or blanket behind them I knew I could improvise some sort of temporary shelter against the rain.

I DO not know how long it was that I wandered. My head felt light from the loss of blood, and everything seemed whirling 'round and 'round. I fervently hoped that I would not walk 'round and 'round in a circle, as I have known men, alone and lost in jungles, to have done. But that slant of the slope pointed the way for me; it sloped down, ever down. I followed it blindly, stupidly.

Quite suddenly, it seemed, I made out about me what appeared to be a vast circle of dancing lights. I knew it was only one light; but with the lightness and whirling of my brain my eyes were seeing things not only double, but a hundredfold. I made toward one light in that circle of lights. Amid all that brooding boom of the rain I shouted madly for assistance.

There was no answer; but I did not pause. Frenziedly breaking through dripping creepers and growths and overthrown trees I stumbled upon a fire blazing under the protection of a framework of *bilian* stakes and a roof of bark. To either side were little shelter-tents, brown and small, and exactly like the shelter-tents used by armies. I could swear, on those shelter-tents there was the black-painted name of Willyum Hyde.

But I was not sure. With the insane hope surging in my breast that I had stumbled upon my own camp I called and called again. At last, from one of the little tents an earringed Dyak boy looked out. He was one of my own Christian boys, surely enough; but at sight of me, torn and mangled and muddy, and standing out there in the rain, he threw up his hands in terror and ducked back behind the flap of the tent.

"Come on out, you fool!" I shouted, though I suppose my voice was little better than a sob. "I'm no bad *antu* of the Poonan, no damned Green, Green God. I'm only Willyum Hyde, Willyum Hyde. I'm only Willyum Hyde who has lost his bride —his all—his Golden Feather of Flame!"

And, my voice trailing off weakly, I pitched forward, almost upon the fire; and I lay there weeping as only a man weeps when his nerve and strength are gone and help is at hand at last.

When I came again to a knowledge of myself I found I was in one of the shelter-tents, lying between warm blankets upon a bed of dry leaves. My broken forearm was set in two clever splints, my waist was constrained in bandages that were as a corset for stiffness and tightness, and there was a bandage about my head. And darting in and out of the tent, hovering solicitously about me, were the three Christian Dyak boys with whom I had come "in" for Coelogyne Lowii, the "Flower of Mercy" of Borneo. It all seemed a dream.

But it was no dream. I had stumbled upon my own camp for a surety and, also, for the very good reason that the boys had awaited me there. They said they knew I never would be able to get inside the Jallan Batoe. And when I told them that I had been inside the Jallan Batoe they only shook energetically their dangling earrings.

"*Nda, nda!*" they said; then added, as if that was proof conclusive, "You were gone only four days, *tuan*."

"Yes," I agreed; "and for three of those four days your master was in the Jallan Batoe. Or rather, I was in the Jallan Batoe three nights and two days."

But they would not believe me; they only carefully scrutinized that bandage on my head; and, indeed, I did not blame them so much for doubting me. I myself could hardly believe that all that had happened to me, had happened in so short a space as two days and three nights.

"Your head has been wandering away from your body, *tuan*," they finally told me. "For a week, ever since the night you stumbled into camp you have been talking, master, of strange things."

"What!" And I sat up. "Have I been here a week?"

They nodded so vehemently that the fringes of black hair upon their low foreheads leaped up and down as in a dance.

"But—but that thudding against the tent, that booming in the air—is that still the rain?"

Again they nodded. For a week, unceasingly, it had been raining, they said. And it continued to rain, ceaselessly, with that great hollow booming, for weeks, for what seemed to me an endless time—a whole month—the while I lay in that tent and convalesced.

Once I asked them what they had done with my hickory shirt. They brought it to me. When I looked at the collar of that shirt I found upon it the blood-prints of a hand. I compared those prints, when they were rebandaging my waist, with those red open wounds in my flesh. They were the same.

I knew then. The Poonan did not know what had happened to me; only *Lip-Plak-Tengga* and perhaps my own Golden Feather of Flame knew what had happened to me; for none of the Poonan had seen me lying as good as dead upon that sunken lava path. The High Priestess had pointed the way, no doubt, and that Monster Man had dragged me by the collar of my hickory shirt out through that tunnel to the jungle outside. For the marks upon my body and upon the collar of that hickory shirt were the same. They were the marks of the blood-besmeared, long-fingered, enormous hands of the Monster Man. My life had been spared by *Lip-Plak-Tengga*. She had loved me—yes.

At the end of a month the rain ceased, and, my arm having knit, I prevailed upon my Dyak boys, after a deal of cajoling, to climb up that dripping overgrown slope. But no tunnel remained. The squalls and heavy downpour of the last month had caused an avalanche down the slope which had broken in the rock roof of the entrance to that tunnel, and had packed before it a solid wall of matted growths, sodden, heavy earth and huge uprooted trees. We started digging at that wall; but the rainy season was on us then, and, a week later, we had to quit work.

With the orchids I already had plucked from the dark jungle, ere I went into the Jallan Batoe, and which my Dyak boys had carefully nurtured and kept for me, I loaded down the *gobang*. We paddled then along the Loeang into the Barito, and so down that river to Banjermasin. There, at Banjermasin, with the money realized from those orchids, I chartered and provisioned a large *tambangan*, hired a crew of twelve Tring Dyak boys instead of my former three, and went "in" again.

I found on the spot where I last had camped, a water-khor or water-hole, from which a small stream ran down into the Loeang. I knew thereupon that the river from the Jallan Batoe, dammed up by that choked tunnel, had wormed a way underground and here, at last, had spouted to the surface. When we reached that caved-in and choked tunnel the digging we had done some months before was entirely obliterated, and the place was only the more stuffed with avalanched earth and overgrown with lush.

We built shelters against the rain and started to work. We cleared off the lush. We were quite fifteen feet in, bolstering up the roof as we went along with stout *bilian* stakes and heavy bark when, one day, that roof caved in, killing three of the boys. The rest of the crew would not work there after that. They said that the Green, Green God of the Poonan did not countenance such work and so was invoking evil upon them. Much against my will I had to come out.

My money was gone then, but I did not give up. I borrowed some more money from a rich Chinese *toko*-keeper of Banjermasin with whom I formerly had traded, and used that money to outfit another expedition. But when, some months later, we got to the volcano of the Jallan Batoe, I could not find the spot where that tunnel had been.

It appeared that, what with tropical storms and the tremendous fecundity of the jungle, that spot where the tunnel had been had so changed its physical appearance and become so overwhelmed by trees and lush-growths, since I last had been there, that there was now no way to differentiate it from the physical appearance and trees and lush-growths of the rest of the jungled slope.

Nothing daunted, however, we tried to climb the steep, sheer barren cliffs of the crater. But above the forest line the volcano slope was lava—lava cliffs straight up and down, lava cliffs smooth as glass. To climb those cliffs was utterly impossible. Once more I was forced to come out.

But I did not go back to orchid-hunting. I wanted to forget. I wanted to go away from the jungle with its rich, warm colors and its rustling little sounds that forever reminded me of the Jallan Batoe and of my Golden Feather of Flame. I wanted to go away from Borneo, to go away from everything that whispered to me of the old sweet life—those tremulous moments of love, lost forever, never to be regained.

Now every two years or so I make enough on the shell-and-pea game to go back and make another forlorn try. Between tries, I wander the world, striving to forget. I walk the beaches. I am only another broken man of the Sea Islands, reduced to a vagabond's straits and shifts, bedding down wherever the dark comes upon me. But in the crimson dawns and in the golden sunsets there is ever a voice calling to me—calling, calling, calling—calling always to me to come back to her, my own Golden Feather of Flame.

CHAPTER XXXI

IN WHICH EVERYTHING ENDS IN THE FO'C'S'LE, WHEN WE LEARN THE REASON FOR MOGUL, THE PARROT

HYDE ceased speaking and, his red-bearded face transfigured with an expectant, ecstatic look, stared across the fo'c's'le, stared past me with unseeing eyes, as if he heard, indeed, his beautiful lost bride calling to him from beyond the years and from beyond the long leagues of sea.

And then, suddenly and sharply and wholly unexpectedly, from the bunk behind me as I, Colum Kildare, sat facing Hyde, a voice said:

"But what happened to her? Where is she now, your Golden Feather of Flame?"

It was the voice of Fitzhamon—the shaken, the overwrought voice of Fitzhamon. He had been wide awake and listening for a long time, it seemed. And he leaned now far out of the bunk behind me, his body upraised on his arm, his bandaged curl-crop of head craning forward over my right shoulder, and his gray somber eyes on Hyde.

I looked over at the great bulk and red head that was William Hyde. He had slumped all together in a heap, so that he seemed not half so huge nor so columnar. And morosely his head was lowered upon his hands. But of a sudden he raised his head and showed a face to us that was the lined, careworn face of one damned to bitterness and to despair. And he looked steadily at us with terrible eyes, and he whispered:

"Aye, where is she now, my Golden Feather of Flame! Where is she now, while I wander the world and have only the memories of my beautiful loved one, and of my triumph and my downfall? Is she dead, my beautiful *Belun-Mea Poa-Poa*—dead, or a slave to the Poonan?

"I do not know. I only know that she ran right back into the arms of those Poonan; and I know, full well, that she was sacrificing herself for me trying to run back with the Green, Green God; but all too late, too late. The Poonan then were not in any mood to show her mercy. I know those Poonan, I tell you. I know what they did, those accursed Golden Rats! They snatched the god from her hands and in their anger, their fanatical hate, they tore her to pieces—she that had been their beloved Queen!

"Or perhaps not that. Perhaps they held her prisoner, and tortured her beautiful body—slowly, remorselessly—tortured her until at last she died, sobbing her unshaken love for me.

"The heart is clean gone out of me. I am haunted day and night by those two visions. But there is a vision more horrible than either of those two visions; a vision that repeatedly I have seen in the dark nights—a horrible vision that sends me screaming out of my sleep, and leaves me shivering and cold with icy sweat. For I see her abandoned and forsaken, and yet living on—living on among those Poonan who hate and torture her—and living on, and suffering pain and anguish of soul each hour of the day and night, while I, Willyum Hyde, whom she loves and for whom she waits, can not return to her."

For a long time after that Hyde remained bowed and silent. Fitzhamon said nothing; I said nothing; and William Hyde looked not at us, but only beyond us into his own sweet and bitter memories. We held sacred the moment, and did not break in upon his thoughts.

And then after a while the shell-and-pea man pulled himself together, shaking his shoulders, with the parrot thereupon, like a man that wakes from a dream. Only by a slight working of the lips, as he strove for self-control, and a strained timbre of the voice, did he give any sign now of his inward suffering. He spoke on as if there had been no interruption at all, and we had not been shown, naked and quivering, his defeated, despairing soul:

"I'm going back now, and I'm going back alone. The dark, hot places of the earth are hard on a man alone, but I'm going back into the Borneo jungle without companions; for this is my last try, and, some way, somehow, this last try, I'm going to win into the Jallan Batoe, or die trekking about on the outer slopes. On such a forlorn, desperate hope, I know, no man will go with me; so I'll go back alone this time—alone, yes, except for the parrot."

He lifted, with the words, the green bird off his shoulder; and Mogul, startled from his sleep, blinked his red eyes excitedly, and clung, quite desperately, with one foot, to Hyde's extended index finger.

"Yes; he's going with me when I go 'in'—Mogul, the parrot, my old faithful bunkie. The Poonan never have seen a live parrot, remember. No; nor a cockatoo, parrakeet, red lory, nor any other species of parrot. There is no kind of parrot in the Jallan Batoe, as I once said, save and excepting only that dead shimmering stone of an accursed Emerald Parrot. And Mogul here is just like that Emerald Parrot—all green, jungle green.

"Into the Jallan Batoe I'll come with Mogul upon my shoulder. He'll strike terror into the Poonan, that old beachcomber of a bird. They'll think he's the twin brother of the Green, Green God, and maybe, a more powerful bird, a more dreadful god. Sight of him perched upon my shoulder may fill them with that old-time awe of me; they'll bow down to me; and all once again may be as it was. And upon the Nine-Times-Nine Throne, as King and Queen of the Poonan, we'll sit once more, perhaps—*Belun-Mea Poa-Poa* and Willyum Hyde!"

Hyde placed the parrot back upon his shoulder, the while I got up upon the edge of the bunk and turned out the light in that swing slush-lamp overhead. Outside the peeping sun already was tinging with crimson the gray swale of the dawn; and inside, in the fo'c's'le, a single hesitant shaft was stealing through the hatchway above the ladder. And noticing that, Hyde said, as I stepped down:

"I think I'll go above and watch the sun break through the silver of the sky. I always watch the coming of the sun. Sometimes I've seen her there, in all that silver and gold; and she seems to have her arms out for me, and she seems not so very far away, only a few steps across the water."

And he went above, up the ladder, to watch the sunrise and to think his thoughts.

Fitzhamon and I talked after that for a full half-hour; we talked of William Hyde. And then, much against Fitzhamon's advice, I went above to offer to go with Hyde into the Jallan Batoe.

But on the deck above there was no William Hyde. Some time before he had dropped overside and, just as he had swum out to the ship, the parrot wheeling above his red head, so he had swum back to the shore and made the beach, the parrot setling cozily down once again upon his saffron shoulder. They were early astir and already started on the long walk along the beach to the next nameless Kanaka town. They were gone, gone utterly, he and the parrot.

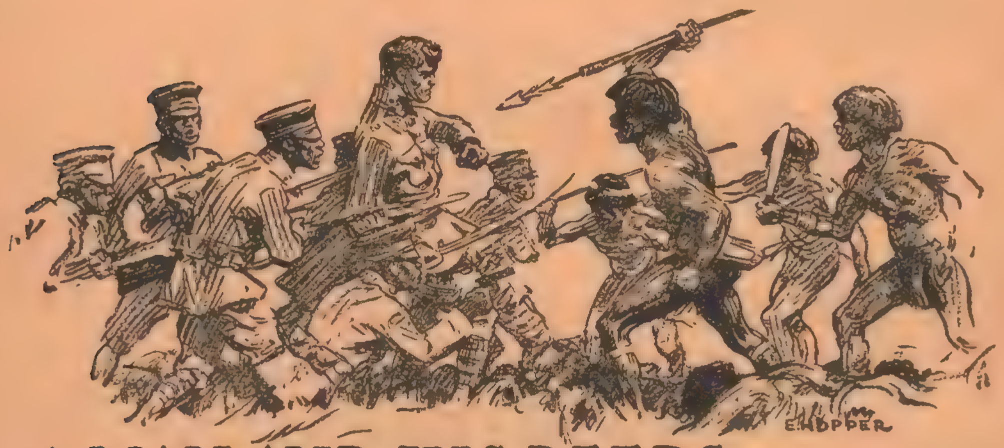
Everywhere, since then, among all the South Islands, I have looked for William Hyde. But he no longer walks the burning beaches; he is gone from the islands. He has gone back to Borneo, I suppose—back to the jungle and the Jallan Batoe. The voice of Golden Feather of Flame has called him and, allured and irresistibly compelled, he has heeded, at last, that call.

But if he has tried to enter once again that Forbidden City of the Poonan, I fear me he is lost forever. I fear me he is dead there within, in that beautiful, terrible place —dead, but with lips that smile even in death. For his lost love's arms are about him, perhaps, and they are together at last, and happy, though in death. . . . Ah, we will wish it so!

And I fear me I shall never see William Hyde again; never again see the shell-and-pea man in the flesh; never again see my red-headed white man of the beaches as first I saw him in Honolulu—a huge monolith of a man, with hair red as blood, his waist deeply pitted by the scars from two enormous, long-fingered hands, his shoulder a perch for a red-eyed parrot, green as the wetness of jungle, and his mouth open in the depths of that red dog-collar of beard, and singsonging now and anon:

"Went Jallan Batoe. Went 'round and 'round, and up the Barito to the Jallan Batoe. And then some, then some, bee-lieve me! Saw the red, red rubies in the Robe of Holies. In the Jallan Batoe. Saw the rubies and the diamonds and the pearls and the emeralds in the Jallan Batoe. And the God, the Green, Green God! And then some, bee-lieve me—*cluck, cluck!*"

THE END



A MAN AND HIS DEEDS

by Donald Francis McGrew

"Author of "The Guns of the Seventy-third," "Chiquita of the Legion," etc.

SOON after obtaining his constabulary commission, young Gordon MacDonald was placed in the hands of Captain Brodney Drew at Iligan, Mindanao. Several raids, which were thought to have been committed by one Dato Pedro, had moved the Insular Government to establish a new company of Moro constabulary near the Las Balas country; and a month or more of tutelage was necessary before the young ex-regular sergeant could be trusted to take command.

Ordinarily, the eccentric little captain would have disliked the task, for he resented the intrusion of another upon the privacy of his quarters. But from the very first he conceived a liking for the youth.

The boy was wholesome. Moreover, he was utterly frank about his ignorance, and listened to his instructions with an eagerness and respect that could not help but please the little veteran. And never, Bunga reflected, had he noted in a man of twenty-four an enthusiasm so naive or a mental attitude so sweetened with faith in human nature.

"Why," grunted Bunga, "if he were a girl, now—which he's not—I'd say he had a *sweet* mind. It's the only word that seems to fit." And he cast a glance at the tall youth who sat writing his daily letter before a certain photograph. "H'm!" he concluded, sighing at the memory of his own hard life. "It must have taken happy home relationships to produce a kid like that."

Becoming more interested in the boy with each passing day, the little man's curiosity grew accordingly. However, he bided his time. He had no intentions of forcing confidences from a youngster who never asked an impertinent question. So it was not until two weeks had passed that Bunga was able to piece together the following story:

Gordon MacDonald was the adopted son of James W. MacDonald, a well-to-do merchant in Evanston, Illinois. Through his foster-father's political influence, he was given a chance at West Point. This he accepted under protest, having no taste for the profession. He had, however, "managed to scrape through by the blessed wink of an eyelash." This "tickled the governor way up the back, for he has always had a bug on militarism, you know, and was set on seeing me an officer."

Nevertheless, the youth had not taken the regulations seriously, and he had been expelled after several absences without leave. The consequent scene with the foster-father filled the boy with contrition, and he had promised the senior to try for a commission from the ranks of the regulars.

After enlisting, receiving promotion to a sergeancy, and obtaining the chance to take the exams, he had, in spite of his "stupenduous" efforts, "come a cropper over Math. and History," thus flunking his last opportunity to obtain a regular commission. The Lieutenant-General at Manila, however, had taken a fancy to him, and offered him a shot at the constabulary.

"So here I am," he concluded with a smile.

"And what did the governor say—eh?"

"Why, he wrote that he didn't want me to boss a lot of little chocolate niggers all the rest of my life. My word, he was frosty! Told me to purchase my discharge at once and come home to his office."

"Well?"

"Oh, I had already decided."

"H'm. Do you think that will be the end of it with Mr. MacDonald?"

The boy laughed.

"Oh, yes. The governor's pretty much a little bit the best of all right. We've only had one bad run-in. 'Twas over a girl he thought would do for me. I didn't. He seems to have forgotten that, and I guess he'll forget this, too."

"Well, let's hope so, anyway."

"Why, yes. But say—here's his picture. Think he looks much like a man to hold a grudge? He has a kindly face, has the governor."

Bunga glanced at the photograph. In his own mind he could not fit the word to that square, rugged face. The eyes were too piercing, the chin too dominant, the lips too stubborn. While there were kindly possibilities in those splendid features, they belonged to a man whose generosity depended upon personal whims. Bunga would have counted on the man's good-nature only as long as he was not crossed.

But of this he said nothing. Neither did he make any remarks about the ommissions or apparent contradictions in the tale until, after drilling the company one morning near the end of his stay, Gordon chose to comment upon them himself.

"By Jove!" he cried, speaking of the drill. "It's fine! It's ripping! I'm beginning to feel something up my spine that—why, that thrills you, you know!"

Then, suddenly realizing that he was being extraordinarily emotional, he blushed for his straps, and dashed into the quarters.

"Going to write another letter to that photograph, I suppose," grinned Bunga. "Eh, well—eh, well——"

HE COUGHED apologetically when he at last entered the quarters, and the youth, jumping, dropped the picture. Then he blushed and picked it up. He turned toward the captain, a shy light in the softened brown eyes, his lip twitching with an embarrassed smile.

"It's all right, Captain," he said. "Suppose you've noticed, anyhow. I—I suppose you've wondered, too, why I suddenly became so anxious to be an officer of some sort. Well—*she* did it. She——"

Suddenly he thrust the picture into Bunga's hands.

"Say, isn't she just a little bit beyond the top hole side of all right?"

Bunga looked; and again he was forced to hide his real impressions. The girl was amazingly pretty, but no one feature merged with the others to give forth a significant impression. One might have seen her every day for months, only to find himself unable to visualize her features after a week of separation.

"H'm!" he said. "She's the Brigadier's daughter, isn't she?"

"Yes. I met her while taking those first exams in Manila. She'd been in Hong Kong, touring, but when she heard that the Brigadier would soon be taking command here, she decided to visit the Lieutenant-General's wife."

"Well, sir, she's a very pretty girl. If I am to congratulate you——"

Gordon blushed.

"No, no. It hasn't gone that far yet. Though I think——"

He broke off, while a faint cloud settled upon his features.

"It hasn't gone that far," he said at last, "because—well, I'll tell you. After all, I'm just a little afraid that the governor has his heart set on my marrying that girl back home. So I really want to be independent of him."

"Quite right. You can not go against a man's wishes and feel like taking his money, can you?"

"No. I can't very well ask a girl to marry me until I have some money saved, either."

"That's good thinking, my boy," Bunga smiled. "You're coming along."

"Oh, I give her the credit. She's service-bred, you know. If it hadn't been for her, I'm afraid——"

"Tut, tut. You've advanced too far to talk that way. Granted that she furnished you with an incentive. But never forget this: A man is his deeds, and for these, first of all, he is responsible to himself. Thank her all you wish, but if she were to die tomorrow—" and Bunga winced at a memory—"go right on doing the work you have set out to do. For after you get through paying the debts you owe to yourself, you'll find you don't owe any to any one else."

A new trend of thought will ofttimes prove to be a man's salvation; but optimistic youth is slow to believe in the need of anything beneath the patent externals. Not believing himself in immediate need of salvation, it is not likely that Gordon spent over two minutes digesting this sermon.

Nevertheless, in the weeks that followed, the words did recur to him; and at least he applied himself to his work with an energy and enthusiasm that soon brought results.

At first he judged these results from the changes manifested in his men. While there were twenty veteran Moro soldiers to work with, the rest were mangy, black-haired, black-toothed *cargadores* whom he must teach to walk properly, to shoot straight, and to obey implicitly.

There was need for haste, too, as Dato Pedro, who had enjoyed the freedom of isolation before the appearance of this company upon his borders, resented bitterly the arrests which Gordon made after each reported crime. Possessing no rifles as yet, and having but four hundred warriors, the old *pulajane* did not feel strong enough to attack the constabulary *en force;* but it was rumored that he was stirring up adjacent tribes with promises of loot, and at any time he might swoop down upon the little post with enough men to wipe it from the earth.

Hence, as the men began to show in their well-drilled shoulders the "set" of units whose minds and bodies could be locked into one reliable whole at a word of command, the heart of the boy glowed warm within him. His men were beginning to show the marks of a work well done.

When he came down occasionally to visit Bunga, the little man took note of the effect all this was having upon the boy himself, and smiled. The deepened tones of the voice, the firmer lines of the lips, and the tightening of the jaw muscles were all good omens.

But Gordon, all aglow with the joy and the possible reward of his work, gave no heed to the testimony of introspection. He wrote glowing letters to "her" each day—

letters that throbbed with the frank heartbeats of a boy.

Oh, it was good, he said—ripping! Why, making these men into soldiers was like sculpturing masterpieces from clay. Yes, it was a gloomy old hole up there in the mountains, but really his days were so full that he had no time to get lonely. Still, he longed for Manila, and—say, wouldn't it be bully when he obtained leave for a run up?

True, there were two flies that appeared in his ointment, and when these came, he sat staring with troubled eyes out over the panorama of forbidding mountains. They came in the shape of two very pointed letters from Mr. MacDonald.

The first letter repeated the order to come home; the second spoke openly and directly of the admirable characteristics of a certain young lady who still remained single, and gave the youth to understand that, unless he saw fit to come to terms with her, he could look forward to some unpleasant results.

"That means I will be cut off," he remarked to Bunga.

"Well?"

"So be it. Marriage is something distinctly individual."

Bunga allowed himself to pat the boy on the shoulder.

"You're right. There's just one thing I want to ask you—is there any way this foster-father of yours can whip you 'round the peg?"

"What do you mean?"

"I was just wondering if this adoption, now, if there was any slip——"

"Captain!" The youth's hands gripped till the knuckles gleamed white. "We've been friends for——"

"Tut, tut! We'll go on being friends, too, as long as you wish. Wouldn't matter a —— to me, one way or the other. I was just wondering whether, if any one had a grudge against you, he could find a flaw in your birth record. It would cost you your commission."

By this time the boy was smiling.

"They've found the records flawless three times," he said. "Besides, father wouldn't dream of doing such a thing, even if he knew the entries to be false."

Bunga grunted, wishing that he could put away the memory of Mr. MacDonald's stubborn and even ugly lips. And partly because of those lips, he wished that the amazingly pretty young lady in Manila would say no to the boy when he went up on his two weeks' leave.

BUT this wish was denied him. When Gordon returned from Manila, he seized Bunga's hand and pump-handled it in an absent-minded way for a full minute. Meanwhile, he refused to meet the older man's eye without blushing.

"Well," said Bunga, "when you get through ruining my hand, I'll congratulate you."

"But I haven't told you yet!"

"No? We-e-el—I hear her father took the Lieutenant-General's place. Suppose he fell on your neck, and all that sort of thing—what?"

The boy laughed shortly.

"No-o-o, I can't say that he did."

"Doesn't surprise me much. When I knew the 'Tail Twister' as a captain, he wasn't the sort to fall on the neck of any young man whose relations with his father's bank pile were strained."

"Oh, but you're a little hard on the Brigadier. An only daughter, doomed to spend her life in the Philippines with a man whose chances for promotion to the regulars are slim—I say, I don't really think he worried so much about the money, really I don't."

"He wrote to Mr. MacDonald, though, didn't he?"

"Oh, yes, naturally. So did I."

"H'm! The girl seems to have proved up, then."

"Proved up? Proved up? Why, bless you, she told her father, with all due respect, that he could jolly well go hang; she would marry me whether or no."

And the youth would have departed in a huff, had not Bunga seized his arm.

"Don't be huffed," he apologized. "When I have reason to—to think—why I'm not so con-demned sure about others who might rip those that I—I think of—up the back. I'm glad the girl has a whang in her bayonet. However, you take warning, and mind your P's and Q's."

But Gordon could not be induced to share Bunga's lugubrious apprehensions. The Tail Twister was, after all, the father of the finest woman living, and Gordon could not believe that a progenitor of such caliber would stoop to wreak vengeance.

The weeks that followed seemed to justify this view. As she wrote, the Brigadier appeared to have forgotten Gordon's existence. So while he "wore his poor dear self out running around those black mountains after the renegades from that horrible Dato Pedro's tribe," she was proceeding blissfully toward the completion of her trousseau.

Hence Gordon dropped to sleep each night feeling that he had drained a full and happy cup. His days were filled with calisthenics, drills, inspections, map-making, and—letters to and from Manila. There were also sundry engagements with unidentified pulajane bands—suspected of being in the pay of Dato Pedro—in which the ripple in his ranks proved to be that of a well-tempered blade. This was especially pleasing, for when a young soldier-smith sees that the forging of his hand will not break with bending, what more can he ask of the Chief Artisan?

"I'll tell you!" he cried to Bunga, coming down three months after his trip to Manila. "It's a ripping world—ripping! Oh, if you could see the little beggars!"

"Poof!" jeered Bunga. "Those fellows were only feeling you out. Let old Dato Pedro take a direct hand in it once, and you'll be wiped out."

"Will we now? Why, I have the old beggar's country mapped—know every foot of it. Let him make a move that justifies our attacking him. We'll——"

Suddenly he broke off, looking seaward.

"Ah, there's the *Seward!*" he cried, and rushed for his pony. "Off for the mail, *el padre-capitan!* Ta-ta."

SO BUNGA watched him depart, his keen, clean-cut face aglow with the fires of youth. And an hour later he came back slowly, his head hanging upon his breast. The sunken eyes held the haunting shadows of a misery too deep to gage.

"I'll resign, all right," he groaned, after entering the quarters. "I'll never go near the governor again, though—never!"

Bunga was staring at the letters which Gordon had handed him. One was from the Brigadier, one from her, and one to the Brigadier from Mr. MacDonald. In accordance with the information in Mr. MacDonald's letter, the Brigadier demanded Gordon's immediate resignation, with the alternative of dismissal once the facts had been forwarded to Washington.

Mr. MacDonald's letter to the Brigadier ran thus:

> I am not surprised to learn that the young man has refused to consider your natural wishes for your daughter's future comfort. A boy who can utterly disregard every wish of a man who has voluntarily clothed and fed him from childhood can not be expected to consider any other person than himself.
>
> But what would you? Over a year ago an old nurse, connected at one time with the foundling asylum from which I took him, came to me and confessed that, because they knew I had taken a fancy to him, and might refuse to take him if he were illegitimate, they had given him the name and birth rights of a baby who died a few days before I adopted him. Even then I was loathe to tell this, or to cut him off; but after giving him every chance, I can not but feel that, under the circumstances, it is my duty to inform you of it. I must also say that I can no longer feel responsible for either his actions or his financial transactions.

The letter from the girl was the longest of all. It was full of emotional statements to the effect that she would have followed him to the end of the world, etc., etc., but in view of the facts disclosed she could not bring herself to disgrace the family name.

"If I only had the running of hell!" gritted Bunga.

He pushed the letters away from him in disgust and turned to the boy. He drew a long breath.

"Well," he said at last, "what are you going to do?"

"I'll resign, of course."

"What for?"

The apparent absurdity of the question stirred Gordon from his stunned lethargy.

"What for? Aren't those letters enough?"

Bunga pointed to the girl's letter.

"——! You wouldn't lie down because of *her*, would you?"

The boy winced before the contemptuous tones.

"You probably won't understand," he said.

"Oh, no, of course not!" snorted Bunga. He had the womanish desire to take this lad in his arms, but a man born of woman needs the strength of a man when he is in the dumps, and Bunga's tones cut like a whip lash. "Of course you're the first decent chap that ever rubbed on a brass lamp."

"But you don't understand, Captain. It's losing what I—what I *thought* she was——"

"Yes, but aren't you man enough to

stand it? And what did I tell you about your inner self? The girl has proved herself. She's out of it. Your life is now your own and the country's, and it is distinctly up to you."

"Grant all that. But what is there in life when——"

"What is there in life?" roared Bunga, the very depth of his pity making him correspondingly rough. "My God! With all the opportunity you have had to think, up there in the mountains, do you still believe that a woman is the only thing worth while in life?"

"The principle of the service is —— poor satisfaction."

"Not when you've paid your debts to it. With this trouble coming on with Dato Pedro, you owe it every bit you know of the Las Balas country."

"But with my birthright taken away, how can I retain my commission and aid any one with that knowledge?"

"Your birthright hasn't been taken away."

"But—when they examine the records——"

"That's the very point. That's where your hope lies."

"Captain, you're absurd. Do you mean to tell me that you have any doubt of its truth?"

"With all due respect for your foster-father, by gad, I'm afraid that I'd suspect anything. A man that is dirt cheap enough to use that sort of knowledge to gain his end, even if it were true, is cheap enough to do the other. At any rate, if you'll promise to stick until the papers are actually in your hands, I'll take a hand in this. Thank God, I know a few people in that little old town of Evanston myself."

The boy shook his head, smiling mirthlessly.

"I'm sorry, Captain, but I can't share your views. It must be true, and that's an end of it. Anyway, now that I see what the Brigadier will do if he is crossed, I can't allow you to jeopardize your own commission to——"

"Jeopardize your grannie's nightcap! Praise be to Allah, I have a record hung up in headquarters that the Tail Twister can't get around. Leave it to me, son, and say you'll stay."

The youth still shook his head, and suddenly, overwrought, he dashed for the door. But Bunga caught him by the arm. And if both were overcome then, they are to be excused.

In the end, Gordon stood up and took the little man half shyly by the hand. He had penned an official refusal to resign, and had promised Bunga to remain until a court-martial or a General Order bade him go.

IN THE frowning mountains of Mindanao, where the vampires float overhead in the twilight, and the saddening boom of the tom-toms comes filtering through the inky nights, it is bad for men to harbor harsh and bitter thoughts. Knowing this, Bunga thought of obtaining a month's leave to visit the boy. But second thought bade him place trust in the stuff that was in his pupil.

His trust was not misplaced. While the boy had no workman's grasp on a well-thought-out philosophy, a promise given was to him a promise to be fulfilled. And knowing that he could not fulfil that promise if his mental self ran amok, he administered for its entertainment large doses of grueling work.

But beyond this he could not go. His ship of faith had been sunk beneath him, and the temporary oblivion of his working hours could not alleviate the pure hell of those nights in which, lying sleepless upon his cot, he floundered amid the wreckage.

"If I could see any need for it!" he would rail. "I can't go through with so thankless a task, Bunga; I can't."

Then a few of Bunga's words would come to him through the night.

"If you ever meet and win out over the test, my boy, you'll thank God for being a man."

"But, great God, *padre*," the boy would wail aloud, "if it were any one but the Brigadier!"

Again the voice would speak to him, repeating the statement with such absolute conviction that Gordon, though failing to understand, must needs subside. Nevertheless, when the threatened revolt of Dato Pedro became a fact, and the old warrior sent down messages defying the entire American government to come and get him, the youth was filled with dread of the Brigadier's coming.

This appeared daily more imminent, for Dato Pedro had enlisted the aid of other tribes, and only a large expedition could cope with him successfully. The Brigadier would command it, and, since he was totally ignorant of the Las Balas district, he would call for guidance upon the only officer in the Islands who knew the trails—Lieutenant Gordon MacDonald.

"All for his personal aggrandizement when it is over, too," groaned the youth. "I only wish my discharge papers would come back before he undertakes this expedition."

This was denied him, for the strands of red tape unroll slowly. So he went on with his daily work which, since he had been ordered to make no more moves into the Las Balas country until the expedition moved, now consisted of monotonous drills.

As a precautionary measure, however, he maintained a daily scouting party of three men in the Las Balas district. These spies were to inform him of the condition of the trails and of any possible change in the position which Dato Pedro was known to have fortified some distance south of a chasm known as the Great Pothole.

Finally the expedition started; and one morning about four months after his promise to Bunga, he led his company out toward the Las Balas district. They were to meet the Brigadier, with four regiments of infantry, a mountain battery, and Bunga's company of constabulary, at the interjunction with the Keithley trail.

A half mile from this interjunction his three spies, who had not reported that morning, suddenly burst out of the cogon grass upon him. They were greatly excited.

"What's the matter?" asked Gordon. "Has Dato Pedro changed his position?"

No, no, they explained, of this they had had no inkling, though some fifty warriors, who apparently were doing some scouting for Dato Pedro, had forced them to flee northward along the edge of the Great Pothole just that morning. This had not caused their excitement.

A great landslide, not uncommon in coral formations, had occurred at the southern end of the Pothole during the night. It had choked the chasm to the brim; and, since the main trail passed through it, the expedition would be forced to march miles out of their way to reach the *casa*.

"Unless they can climb it," said Gordon. "How about that?"

"No, no, *teniente!*" cried his sergeant. "That's what make so fonny. It ees like thees—" holding his hand perpendicularly— "t'ree hundre' feet, straight down. Lots big smooth rock, thirty feet. No can get hold—*mucho mallo.* No can climb."

"H'm!" mused Gordon. "Well, I guess that settles it."

Forwith, he took out his service maps, and with his eraser removed the lines running southward from the end of the Pothole to the dato's *casa*. Then he moved on to the interjunction and the Brigadier.

He writhed inwardly at sight of the beefy jowls and the close-pressed lips. It is said that the General reddened also, and that his cold gray eyes became a little harder. This only added to the hate of the boy, with its accompanying distaste for personal contact; and he determined to make his report as brief, military and concise as possible.

Therefore, after reporting his company, he simply extended his service maps. They, he thought, could do the talking for him.

"The maps of the Las Balas district, sir," he said in explanation.

"Yours, eh?" grunted the Brigadier. "Well, they may do to compare with the Spanish maps that Don Pablo has produced." And the General beckoned to a smirking, dark-skinned Tagalog in his rear.

When this man had produced the old Spanish maps, the General began glancing from them to Gordon's.

Suddenly he looked up.

"There appear to be several discrepancies here, Mr. MacDonald. What are the meanings of all these superfluous trails?"

"They are there as I found them, sir."

"They're not on the Spanish maps. They had a post up there for some time, too."

"You'll find them all there, sir."

"But, —— it, they don't converge, as I have been told they did. Here, Don Pablo, what do you make of this?"

The Filipino took the maps with an air of superior wisdom that galled the youth.

"Ha!" he exclaimed. "One, two, three too many, for practeecal use. If there be so many, what for? Take the one, take the other, all go to Dato Pedro's *casa* 'cept one 'cross the Argus to Lake Lanao. Of course thees—" pointing to the main trail through the Pothole—"ees the shortest and the only practeecal one the Spanish use. So what's use mark rest?"

"Hear that, Mr. MacDonald?" said the Tail Twister. "Now *you* have two trails ending at your mark 'Pedro's *casa*.' Your main trail ends in the Pothole—or what should be the main trail according to Pablo. The others straggle off hell west and crooked, one to Lake Lanao, another toward Pampanguay, another to the Cota Bato. According to your map, then, the only way I can reach Dato Pedro is to march this column around this circuitous trail away off to the west of the Pothole, making the trip about ten miles farther than it should be according to the main trail on the Spanish map."

For a moment the boy paused on the verge of telling the General of the landslide. But the Tail Twister was glaring at him as if he considered him a liar, or a fool, or both.

"The maps can speak for themselves—and me," he vowed inwardly. Aloud he said, "They are all correctly mapped as I found them, sir."

"With the main trail ending in the Pothole?"

"Yes, sir."

The Brigadier looked undecided. He glanced from Gordon to Don Pablo.

"Look here, Don Pablo," he suddenly demanded, "how long did you soldier up there with the Spanish?"

"*I saldado tres anno* this place," replied the Tagalog with dignity.

"By gad, that settles it, then. You should know what you're talking about." And the General gave the command to move on.

During the space of a second, Gordon fought hard for self-control. In the next breath he could have laughed in his commander's face.

"Let him march in and run into that insurmountable wall," exulted the bitter youth as they marched along. "By gad! I'll have something to grin over when he has me cashiered, anyhow."

HAVING been ordered to cover the left flank rear with his company, he was forced, for the next three hours, to cut his way with the machete through the vine-choked bosquet on the left of the main trail. At the end of this time, the nature of the country made him close in on the trail, which he reached near the entrance of the Pothole.

An orderly awaited him; and far down the cañon he could see Bunga's company just making a turn. They had already closed in from their position on the right flank rear and were following the main column down the chasm.

"The General's compliments, sir," said the orderly, "and the left flank rear will examine this trail down to the river cañon, and then return and follow the main body through the Pothole."

Gordon acknowledged the order, and turned his company at once to the left. The trail in question branched from the old main route, proceeding downward and in a southeasterly direction for a quarter of a mile to the bed of the Argus River.

The first half passed through woods, while the last half cut its way through a narrow, rocky gorge. This ran practically level to a point two hundred yards from the edge of the water. Here it dropped precipitately down a slope devoid of tree or boulder. On the opposite side of the ford it shot up again into dense woods, and wound on away to Lake Lanao in the southeast.

With his little men behind him, Gordon went swinging along into the narrow cut between the rock ledges. Suddenly, chancing to glance to the left, he saw several brown figures scurrying from rock to rock in the direction of the river.

"By gad!" he muttered, as his men cried out behind him. "We may see a little fun, after all. Sergeant Khava, take five men up the side there, and pot those fellows! Companee—double-time—ho!"

At the first shot from Sergeant Khava, the Moro scouts threw aside all effort at concealment, and ran yelling toward the ford. Their calls awakened a roar that quickened Gordon's footsteps. He rushed to the end of the cut to gaze upon a sight that stopped him dead in his tracks.

He saw the whole plan in a flash. With their foremost men already splashing through the water, a horde of warriors trooped down from the dense growth on the opposite side. Dato Pedro, tall, broad-shouldered, and belted with gold, stalked with all the dignity of a fierce old warrior at their head.

With the landslide to aid him, he had deliberately hidden his men until the General and the main column were safely into the Pothole. Now he intended to spread his horde on either side and surround them. Due to Gordon's delay in the bosquet, he had thought the rear guard closed up, and so moved a little too soon.

Gordon gasped as he guessed at their numbers. They kept coming from the trees, wave after wave of tall, sinewy, long-armed fellows with determined chins and sullen eyes. Fifty per cent. of them were armed with rifles and muskets of various makes, while the rest, in addition to the usual bolo or barong, carried long-handled, double-edged spears. There were enough bolo-men there to swamp and crush the Brigadier in his cramped position, not to speak of the execution the riflemen might do from the sides of the chasm.

Now a rear guard, when attacked by superior numbers, is theoretically supposed to rush a file to the main column for help, and to close in as speedily as may be upon that column. In the face of the numbers confronting him, no man could have blamed Gordon for retiring at once. In that case the Brigadier, who had blundered into the cañon of his own free will, would be left to general himself out of it as best he could.

"By gad, why not?" Gordon soliloquized in that fleeting second. His men, too, seemed to voice the same opinion in the expression of their faces. They were of a fighting people—but! "He deserves cutting up—or worse, living to be retired in disgrace."

But with the possibilities of the situation clear before him, a disturbing thought checked his exultation. In merely handing the General his maps, had he fully performed his duty?

True, the General had taken a Filipino's word against his, and had in reality given him no *official* opportunity to explain the landslide. Furthermore, he, Gordon, had not known of this move on the part of Dato Pedro. He had only allowed, in the beginning, the General to take his own way and march a needless ten miles.

But now that the blunder on the part of the Brigadier had placed those regiments of American soldiers in danger of annihilation, was he, Gordon, wholly innocent in the matter? To settle a private grudge, he had wilfully withheld *oral* information—information that would have cleared the air in a word, and started the General around by the other trail. Hence, could he call himself morally guiltless?

There was another thing that crashed through his mind also—a sentence from out of the past. It had something to do with a test, something about duty and the subjugation of self in the interests of the service—some sort of bally rot that school-children spout on Washington's birthday, and which soldiers blush at the thought of.

"——!" he grinned at the end of that 'steenth part of a second. "The Moros might kill him and never let him live to know what it means to be cashiered in disgrace. I'll check these beggars up a bit and see how he likes being protected by a boob."

He sent a man running to the rear with a message to the main column, and then yelled, with a whip and a ring in the command—

"As skirmishers—behind those rocks—commence—firing!"

The slaughter of that first volley was appalling; yet at first Gordon did not hope to do more than reduce the numbers who would eventually attack the Brigadier. It seemed almost inevitable that the greater part of his company, himself included, would be wiped out in the process of "checking the beggars up a bit." Nor did fifteen seconds of steady firing change his opinion. In spite of the fact that the range was almost point blank for the single-shot Springfields, the mob refused to run. Instead, they spattered his position with a hail of lead, and, scrambling over the bodies of the dead, came rolling up the slope like the angry comb of a tidal wave.

* * *

BUT in the mêlée that followed, hope soared high within him. On either side of the narrow cut were ledges, covered with rocks that could be used for breastworks and rifle-rests; and these ledges dropped a sheer twenty feet to the beginning of the slope. The Moros could not scale them. In order to reach the little men in blue and khaki, they must rush into the narrow chute, and from there up over the sides. To reach the chute, they must cross the river and two hundred yards of open, now literally alive with flying lead.

Hence, in that reckless charge, the brown men left windrows of dead and wounded behind them. They fell in tens and twenties until it seemed the very dead would form a barricade against their fellows' further advance; and suddenly the boy rose to the tips of his toes in a wild shout of victory.

The Moros were breaking. Some were already turning to run back. A moment more, and the shock of their appalling losses turned them in consternation toward the woods beyond the ford. Not over twenty reached the little cut, to be finished with gun-butt and bayonet.

When this furious work was finished, Gordon wiped the sweat from his eyes and took a swift inventory. Two of his men were dead, and six sorely wounded. The remaining ninety-two were in high spirits, dancing jigs, chanting old tribal songs, or taking pot shots at any form that showed across the river. When he caught an eye here and there, it made him think of a pet bull-dog who used to return to him for a patting after each victorious fight.

"Small blame to thim!" quoted their commander, walking up and down in his happy excitement. "They'll never come back after that."

"*Si, si, teniente*," grinned the trumpeter, who was busy dealing out the cartridges. "They no come. They plenty sick."

But just then the singing of his men ceased. Sound carries easily in the high altitudes of Mindanao, and their ears were straining to catch the voices on the other side.

"They no vamoose, *teniente*," said one sergeant. "The priest talk. Listen!"

High and shrill, the voice of an exhorter came to them across the valley. Occasionally a roar greeted some ringing question, then silence fell upon the invisible listeners. The voice rose ever higher, shrilling with hate and trembling with indignation.

"He call them in Allah's name," interpreted the sergeant.

"Seems to me it would take Allah to send them on again after that," muttered Gordon.

"Ha! Now talk Dato Pedro!" exclaimed the sergeant.

"And I shot at him four times myself!" murmured Gordon. "Lord, listen to that!"

Never in his experience had he heard a human voice ring out so powerfully. Its deep bass tones thrummed and re-echoed across the cañon. The man was vibrant, athrill, alive. He threw his words into his listeners with the twanging crack of a bull whip. Gordon recognized that tone as one to which men give silence as a tribute, while underneath the spirit swells to the point of bursting.

"By gad!" he muttered uneasily. "He's liable to start something *pronto*. Juinto, hurry up with that ammunition."

The bass voice rose to its climax, then broke into a wild song. It was a chant such as Gordon had never heard, a chant brought down from the days when the Sahara Moslems charged in reckless abandon behind the indomitable Ali Azrid. The maddening thrum of its undertone rang with the pounding of drums, the shrilling of pipes, the clanging of shields and the thunder of hoofs.

"I believe they're coming!" exclaimed the boy.

They were—with a crashing yell that rose and drowned the roars of the Springfields. Fired by their leader's spirit, and firmly believing that a Christian killed is a gift in the eyes of Allah, the reckless fanatics swept from the woods and charged across the gorge like a herd of bison.

The very magnificence of their daring first thrilled, then chilled the heart of the boy. They came and came, over tens and twenties, over thirties and forties of bloody, huddled dead.

The constabulary worked their gunbolts with the frenzy of an orchestra approaching a finale. Their bullets cut into the brown avalanche as a scythe mows into the grass; but the horde came rolling on.

It was almost unbelievable. And suddenly the youth's heart sank within him. Several of his men had risen to their feet, just on the point of retreating.

The boy could not blame them overmuch, for the *pulajanes* filled their gaps so rapidly that the very dead seemed to rise up to rush again. To their superstitious minds, these oncoming warriors appeared to be filled with the blood of invincible devils. Perhaps, after all, Allah was with the *pulajanes*, and they, the constabulary, were rendered powerless because he had cursed them for accepting service against their Moro brothers. Could the *commandante* ask them to fight it out when Allah had turned against them?

There was little time in which to debate. Gordon leaped down into the narrow cut, calling on the nearest men to follow him.

He need not have spoken. It is example which reaches the ear in the heat of battle. This young American dato, who had nursed them in their illnesses and fed them from his own pocket when red tape blocked the delivery of their rations—this man who treated each and every one with absolute fairness, and who, above all, had proven to be a *bueno soldado dato* in their previous engagements— *he* chose to die rather than be beaten. *Bueno! Allah il Allah, but Teniente MacDono' il Teniente MacDono'*—and be —— to the consequences!

The men he called upon leaped into the cut behind him.

The two parties met with a crash; and the hideous din of the rifles and the shock of contact tore the boy loose from his moorings. He could never have given a coherent account of the actions there in the cut. As but four men could fight abreast, the contestants were jambed till there was scarce breathing-room.

He heard as in a dream the wild curses of the twenty men who were pushing forward behind him, while in front of him there swayed a stinking, bellowing sea of black, black heads with wide-open red, red mouths. These were studded with filed, black teeth, and ran with streams of betel-juice that filled him with a sickening sense of fury and nausea.

He fired into them blindly till his pistol had emptied its chamber; then he lashed out with his saber, cutting and slashing in a mad frenzy.

After a seeming century of this, he began to stumble and to struggle with his consciousness. It seemed that, no matter how many he cut down, the devils would come on.

Something warm gushed down his neck and side, and his left foot felt as if he were pulling it in and out of a stream of scalding water. His stomach appeared to have turned completely over. His mouth was caked with cotton. His sword arm struggled against hellish rubber cords that pulled it down.

He began to sob weakly. Perhaps, after all, he had made a mistake in not remaining above to direct the movements of his men.

But in entertaining this doubt, he insulted the non-commissioned officers who had attended his little night school. While the privates in the cut pushed forward, and elbowed one another aside to bayonet the foremost of the Moro crush, the sergeants and corporals above kept their men firing into the mob below.

Lying atop the insurmountable ledges, and firing at a distance of twenty feet, their fire wrought fearful havoc with the mass. In addition to this, the non-coms fed the defenders of the cut. As each man pressed forward over the body of a fallen comrade, another slipped down into the chute to take his place.

This Gordon could not know, as he dared not turn his head. He only knew that the hellish roar of the rifles was driving him crazy, and that the world seemed full of dancing bolos, flashing spear-heads and jabbing bayonets.

He was choking with the rancid odor of blood, betel-juice and sweat. Neither could he pull his leg from the hot water that seemed to rise now to his knee.

He staggered and cried out, sensing dimly that he could not remain upright much longer. And then a great cry went up, a wave seemed to push him forward, and he suffered the amazing sensation of being sucked up into a long, black funnel.

CONSCIOUSNESS returned with a sensation of drowning. He staggered to his feet, swabbing viciously at the water which a corporal had thrown into his face. Stumbling about amid the slippery dead bodies, he cleared his eyes at last of blood and sweat and water. He sensed the meaning of it all then, for the remainder of the Moros were in full retreat.

He opened his lips to yell, but the effort produced only a dry cough. Reeling with dizziness, he sat down on a rock to quench his raging thirst.

When the last of the enemy had disappeared behind the trees, the youth's head had cleared somewhat. He looked 'round about him, taking inventory.

Some of his little men were writhing on the ground, torn by horrible wounds. Others twisted and gasped in the throes of extreme physical exhaustion. Still others staggered round and about their dead comrades, their faces resembling those of a runner at the fag end of a heart-breaking marathon.

Here a man shrieked with hysteria, and there a man mumbled drowsily, as drunk as if he were filled with moonshine whisky. The comparatively fresh sharpshooters from the ledges wreaked their vengeance upon the wounded with butt and bayonet, while the remainder helped their stricken fellows or lay prone upon the ground, gasping like fish out of water.

Gordon saw all this, but could not find the strength to give an order. He wanted, like those who gasped for air, to lie and lie forever and a day. Two sergeants worked at his wounds, but he suffered their attentions without realizing just what they were doing.

Finally, however, when the last man came straggling back from the bloody ruck, he roused to the situation.

"Here," he said, pushing the sergeants away with a weak hand, "those men need attention, too. Why, there must be—how many are there?"

"Twenty-seben dead an' fi'teen wound'," they told him.

"Then we must get the freshest men and drag the wounded to the ledges."

In spite of their efforts to make him lie quiet, he stumbled among them till the last wounded man lay upon the ledge. He could scarcely keep his feet, but he braced himself against the shoulder of his first sergeant.

"Take a siesta, *teniente*," pleaded the sergeant. "They plenty sick. They no come back."

"Not—just—yet. I suppose I have to play the boy on the burning deck till reenforcements come. Hold on, though—let me down 'gainst the rock so I don't look like such a bally ass."

Sprawling against the rock, he grinned foolishly, and stared at the sergeant through a veil of cobwebs.

"Do y' know," he mumbled, "it's funny. Something trying to tell me I'm sick. Not. Just as well's you. Even remember poem—Know the poem 'bout the boy on the burning deck?

"Boy stood on the burning deck——"

"Listen, *teniente*, listen!"

"Whence all but he had fled.
A seagull laid a hard-boiled egg——"

"*Teniente!*"

"And dropped it on his head.

What's the matter?"

"They come again!" yelled the sergeant, shaking him. "You say retreat—or what?"

Gordon brushed the cobwebs from his eyes with an angry gesture, then came to his feet as he heard the voice of Dato Pedro roaring across the cañon. And as he gained his balance, the remainder of Dato Pedro's forces came rushing from the woods for the third time. He had performed the miracle. Instead of lagging, every warrior behind him came on with the frenzied speed of the *juramentado*.

Gordon spat wearily upon the ground. He gazed 'round at his men. Their sunken eyes and lead-colored lips told a piteous story. It seemed criminal to call on them for more.

"What a —— of a nuisance!" he mumbled, and then, with a jerk at his belt, stumbled down into the cut.

A weak cheer preceded a sputtering, crazy volley that landed anywhere from the river-bed to the tops of the trees, while a squad of drunken scarecrows tumbled into the cut to meet the rush. With their bayonets describing erratic circles, and a dizzy boy trying to keep his balance before them, they stood and waited.

"AND they would have made mincemeat of you and your little band of invalids," said the captain-doctor, when, two days later, Gordon sat propped up in the officers' ward of the hospital at Overton. "They certainly would've if Captain Drew had not arrived in the nick of time with his men."

"He's a grand old chap is Bunga," smiled the boy.

"Well, I know others, I know others. If Dato Pedro had gone through, now, I'm thinking that the Brigadier—ha! But here is the Brigadier himself."

The captain-doctor beat a retreat, while the Brigadier, with a very shy and nervous young woman behind him, came into the quiet room. The Brigadier was plainly ill at ease, but he managed to remember that, after all, he was still a Brigadier.

"I'm—I'm glad to see that you're getting along so nicely, Mr. MacDonald," he said, with many clearings of the throat. "You did your duty exceptionally well, sir, exceptionally well."

"Thank you, General," said the boy.

"I'm also glad to tell you—*hrrruh*—that I have some information about your birthrights that your foster father—er, seems to have misinformed me about. It appears that Captain Drew took the trouble to have them looked up. Some one was misinformed or deliberately prevaricated."

"Then I'm——"

"All square with the law. An old attendant there unearthed a distant relative of yours, and the records were proven to be quite correct."

"I'm *very* glad to hear that, sir."

"*Hrruh*—yes, quite naturally. Of course I shall explain to headquarters. You may also like to know that I have recommended you for a medal of honor and your men for certificates of merit."

"Thank you, General."

"No thanks, no thanks. Deserved it, deserved it."

The General searched for more words; but it suddenly occurred to him that there were places where a man could be more at ease than *he* could facing this respectful, brown-eyed boy.

"I think," he said, "I think—well, I'll leave it to you two."

When her father had gone, the suffused girl tried to meet those quiet brown eyes.

"Captain Drew told me this morning," she stammered. "Will you ever—ever——"

"Forgive you? Oh, yes."

"But, if you do—are you going to say nothing else? Are you going to——"

"You make it very hard for me," said the boy.

The girl struggled a moment with pride and shame. Her answer lay in the depths of those eyes. They were neither reproachful nor vengeful. They were even quietly kind. But they were also strictly impersonal.

"I think—" she began.

Then suddenly turned with a half sob, and hurried from the room.

So Bunga found him among his pillows, half smiling, half sad.

"Well," said Bunga, as briskly as he might, for both hated unnecessary demonstration, "I suppose the Brigadier told you what I found out. I wanted to allow him the pleasure of telling you himself."

"He told me. And I say—you're pretty much of a brick, as bricks go, do you know that?"

"Brick, ——! Your foster-father, you see—letter from him, too, after my friend Adair talked to him—well, he didn't realize it would cost you a means of livelihood—your commission. He only wanted to break up this engagement."

"Well, he succeeded."

"What? Didn't you——"

"The Brigadier's daughter will go back to Manila to stay, I presume."

"Hooray!" shouted Bunga. "And you?"

"Oh, me? Why, I'm going to stay, of course—so you can pull me out of another hole."

"Pull, ——! You've learned, then, what I tried to beat into your fool head?"

"Naw!" grinned the boy. "I only did it to make the Brigadier sweat blood."

But the little man knew better; and as the evening gun sounded, they turned their faces to listen to "The Star Spangled Banner." It has its own meaning for men of deeds whose souls have been interwoven with the spirit of the service.

THE CAMP-FIRE

A Meeting-Place for Readers, Writers and Adventurers.

IN THE January issue we published the photograph of an unknown man found dead on a Canadian trail by one of our number, C. E. McBride. Today comes a letter from a man who believes the body was that of a chum of his. The circumstances of the two cases, so far as they are now known, coincide closely. The letter is being forwarded to Mr. McBride. One of our identification cards would have been of value here.

THE chief argument of the pacifists, of those who oppose adequate preparation for national defense, is that military training for our boys and young men will imbue the spirit of militarism in the coming generation.

They have no *proof* that it will. They just *think* it will and *say* it will. It is only a *theory*, an expression of their own belief, this argument upon which they base most of their campaign.

Facts? Have they any facts with which to prove their case? No, just theories. Just opinions. Just say-so.

Well, let's mallet them over the head with the *facts* in the case. The *facts* prove just the opposite. And we don't have to go to Australia or Switzerland to get them. For many years many thousands of our own youth have been receiving compulsory military training in our public-school system. I mean the various State universities where for two years of his course every able male student is compelled to undergo military instruction and military drill. At these universities are stationed officers of the regular army, and the drill is real drill.

THERE you have it exactly—our youth undergoing compulsory military training. Exactly what the pacifists *say* "imbues militarism" in our youth. But *does* it? No. Just the opposite. When the boy finds out that war isn't merely glamour and glory, the martial flame which burns in the breast of every normal boy receives a dash of cold water.

No, the *facts* explode this theory which the pacifists make their main argument. I first put this to the test at a dinner of the alumni of my own university, Ohio State. They ranged from men thirty years out of college to the last crop of graduates. Of the 24 written ballots I received before I had to run for a train, only 1 said his two years' drill had increased his desire for war; 2 said it had for preparation only; the other 21 said it had *decreased* their militant tendencies. Out of 24, 23 flatly contradicted the pacifist theory!

THEN I tried the men still in college, some drilling, some through with it. Ohio State's daily, the *Lantern*, printed the following four questions in the form of a ballot. To the 78 signed statements thus secured are to be added 55 votes that the *Lantern's* editor, Melvin Ryder, personally secured from two fraternities. A total of 133. Here is the result:

1. *Has military service increased your desire to take part in war?*

Yes	15
No	112
Undecided	1

2. *Has it decreased it?*

Yes	33
No	91
Undecided	8

3. *Do you regard military training as a valuable part of the education of American young men?*

Yes	87
No	30
Undecided	4

4. *Do you favor longer military service in universities?*

Yes	57
No	62

Study the above results. In 112 out of 133 military training has *not* increased the militaristic spirit. It has increased it for 15, but actually *decreased* it for more than twice that number, 33.

Considering that, at least in my day, 90% of the students hated drill, the replies to No. 3 and No. 4 are amazing and very sad for the pacifists.

SOME pacifist will say college boys don't know anything about anything. Well, remember that when the vote was taken among men years out of college the result was still more overwhelmingly against the pacifists. Also it seems to me that an undergraduate who has been drilled for two years is a darned sight better judge of the effects of drill than is a pacifist of 40, 50, 60 or even 90 years who never was drilled in his life and prefers theories to facts. Particularly if the pacifist is a lady.

Of course my fact test was on a small scale, but as a result of it the matter will probably be getting a thorough test, and when the results come in from all the State universities this big argument of the pacifists will have its death-blow.

THE U. S. Marine Corps has never had a publication devoted to its interests as have the other services, but now that is to be remedied. Captain Frank E. Evans, U. S. M. C., retired, is in charge of the new magazine and will be especially glad to hear from any ex-marines who have had service at the front with any of the European belligerents or have had experience elsewhere that would make interesting and profitable reading for those still in the U. S. M. C. Letters addressed to Captain Evans in our care will be forwarded.

EDWARD S. PILSWORTH enters *Adventure* this month with a story, "The Pillar of Flame," and rises according to custom to give an account of himself:

Necedah, Wisconsin.

Your request for an autobiographical sketch is rather embarrassing because I have so little to say that could be of interest to readers of *Adventure*.

Between ourselves, the "Camp-Fire" is the most interesting part of any magazine that I know of, principally, I think, because of the human nature it contains. I read every tittle of it, for the side-lights on men and actions, reasons and interests, and the exposing of hidden character traits are tremendously interesting.

My ancestry are everywhere Irish, an adventurous crowd, full of soldiers and what not, but my hope of following in their footsteps was killed by a marriage at twenty. The kids kept me hustling till a few years ago, when I became my own man again.

Most of my life till the age of eighteen was spent in England, and the one great adventure of it was my arrival in this country at that age. Since then I have lived and wandered over nearly all of the North, East and South, but have crossed the Mississippi only a couple of times.

A pleasant disposition has been forced upon me by physical conditions; as I stand six feet one, and weigh over two hundred, which an outdoor life has toughened to an extent, it is not possible for such a party to indulge belligerent tendencies with the average person through fear of consequences. At that I am the shortest man in my family, and I have three brothers.

WE ARE all artists; I guess it runs in the blood, and that is the profession I have always followed. Maybe it accounts somewhat for my love of outdoors and nature, for the ideal life, I think, is one in a tent, or, better still, outside the tent, with only the sky for cover, and the stars watching to see that no bugs get into a fellow's ear.

Some ten or twelve years ago I began to combine story writing with drawing, and it was then I perpetrated an act that I understand has been a source of trouble to editors ever since. I was the original culprit who introduced the tramp to fiction. Several magazines published him, *McClure's*, *Metropolitan*, etc., and the *People's* ran a series on him for two or three years. I had to break it off because I took a five-year contract writing text-books, etc., for an art school. When my time was up I hit for the woods, and incidentally went back to writing.

WHILE I lived in Pittsburg I had some experience with oil, enough so that I could talk intelligently about it, and last year, while on an eight or ten hour journey to Chicago, fell into talk with a man who had "wild-catted" some in the Southwest. We found we had several points of interest in common, and in the course of our journey, he told me most of the incidents that make the meat of "The Pillar of Flame." The tale, in its main facts, is truth. Just enough fiction for interest and to take it away from a plain narrative.—EDWARD S. PILSWORTH.

HERE is a letter from another of us at the front about the American Legion. It was written on a letterhead of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, and printed at the top is the following:

Do not mention your rank, battalion, brigade or the names of places; expected operations, movements or numbers of troops; casualties previous to publication of official lists, or make specific reference to the moral or physical condition of troops.

Belgium, November 21, 1915.

Back in 1914 you began organizing an American Legion for defense purposes, etc. It took my eye, but up until then I had had no military experience. Since then, according to an article I read in a magazine a chap had sent to him, the movement has developed into a vast enrollment of all branches of war "trades" and I want to see what opportunities present themselves in the aerial line. You will certainly need pilots, and as West Point is open to about one in fifty thousand, I want to try the air. From our line of trenches I have watched nearly every day the enemy's guns shelling our planes with shrapnel, but to date haven't got one in our vicinity, although we got three of theirs in that time. I am also very expert in dodging snipers and can show a great burst of speed in getting cover from coal-boxes, etc.

I AM a regimental signaler and can hit a man's head and shoulders three times out of five at 600 yds., with a wind. I am also proficient in opening cans of Bully Beef with my bayonet. Of course if I happen to get mixed up with anything hard coming my way, the bet's off. Anyway, drop me a line when you haven't anything better to do and pardon the use of this sheet on both sides, as paper is bread around these parts.

My home address is 34 Irving St., Framingham, Mass., and my folks are forwarding you the necessary for a six months' subscription to be sent here if possible. If the first edition gets sent back undelivered, you are in five editions. I've read *Adventure* since the first issue right through, and if I didn't consider it the best ever I wouldn't read it.—SIGNALER W. J. DWYER.

P. S. Count me in the Legion if I last this out.

OUR identification-cards remain free to any reader. The two names and addresses and a stamped envelope bring you one.

Each card bears this inscription, printed in English, French, Spanish, German, Portuguese, Dutch, Italian, Arabic, Chinese, Russian, and Japanese:

"In case of death or serious emergency to bearer, address serial number of this card, care of ADVENTURE, New York, U. S. A., stating full particulars, and friends will be notified."

In our office, under each serial number, will be registered the name of bearer and of one friend, with permanent address of each. No name appears on the card. Letters will be forwarded to friend, unopened by us. The names and addresses will be treated as confidential by us. We assume no other obligations. Cards not for purposes of business identification. Later, arrangements may perhaps be made for money deposits to cover cable or telegraph notifications. Cards furnished free of charge, *provided stamped and addressed envelope accompanies application. Send no applications without the two names and two addresses in full.* We reserve the right to use our own discretion in all matters pertaining to these cards.

Later, for the cost of manufacture, we may furnish, instead of the above cards, a card or tag, proof against heat, water and general wear and tear, for adventurers when actually in the jungle, desert, etc.

A moment's thought will show the value of this system of card-identification for any one, whether in civilization or out of it. Remember to furnish stamped and addressed envelope and to *give the two names and addresses in full when applying.*

THE idea of a Red-Headed Regiment seems to take hold well. Not only are replies coming in, but the type of men interested is of the very best for the purpose. Probably the majority of those who have sent in their names are either ex-Army men or now near the end of their enlistment, but no able-bodied red-head need hesitate to send in his name because he has not yet had actual military training. He is needed, too.

Quite aside from the military value of such an organization, the idea of any definite clubbing together of red-headed men throughout the country has a decided appeal. They ought to know each other—to have their own lodge.

BUT the main point, of course, is that "the Red-Heads" ought to be one of the best fighting units, and one of the best known, that ever took the field. The first letter is by way of endorsement of this, from a man whose hair is not red, but who has fought with red-headed soldiers. The others are merely samples of the replies that have come in, showing the spirit, character and training of the men who have responded:

Couldn't "make" the "Red-Heads," as I am black-haired, but, believe me, from what I know of red-headed soldiers (I am an ex-Service man) that should be one "scrapping outfit."

I certainly enjoy every number of *Adventure*, especially the Service stories by Robert J. Pearsall, M. S. Wightman and Capt. George Brydges Rodney. If old Pearsall doesn't know the service, no one does. —HARRY W. SCHUSTER, Eureka Springs, Arkansas.

My enlistment will expire within a short while, after twelve years' service in the Navy. I'm as "red-headed" as they make 'em, and when I enter civil life I should like to be a member of the Red-Headed Regiment. I think I can enlist at least ten more "redheads."—WILLIAM HUGH STOCKWELL, U. S. S. *New Jersey*.

I am a genuine red-head with three years of militia service to my credit. I am interested in the proposed regiment. I served one enlistment in Battery A., I. N. G., First Field Light Artillery. Was honorably discharged as corporal and gunner August 7, 1913, at the close of my enlistment. Please keep me posted as to the progress of the Red-Headed Regiment and enter me as a prospect in the Battery.—J. DE MOTTE MORRISON, Indianapolis.

I notice your Red-Head Regiment in December number. I am one and as long as there is a hair on my head I reckon it will be red. Many Regular officers are assigned to Volunteer regiments in time of war, etc., so I hereby make my application now. Am graduate of the U. S. M. A. (West Point). Have had service in the Philippines and elsewhere.

The above is from an officer in the regular army. As previously stated, the best way to select the officers of the regiment is to have the qualifications of all members passed upon by a neutral board of military experts, training and experience being the sole basis of selection. If the regiment can show itself a proper unit, properly officered, it should have a good chance, in case of emergency, of being mustered into service without any changes in its internal organization.

I am a red-head and proud of it. You say "redheads" are notoriously good fighters. According to the genealogical records of the Bentley family, you have written the truth.

I find in the history of Chester Co., Ohio, that in 1747 a regiment was formed in the time of the English and French war, and George Bentley was appointed a lieutenant. Also I am informed that Fred Alfred Bentley was Captain of the 6th Regiment, Albany Co., New York Militia under Col. S. J. Schuyler in 1775-1778. And that Caleb Bentley was Captain of the 5th Regiment, Dutchess County, New York Militia, under Col. William Humfrey during the Revolution. So you see I agree with you. All of our family, that is the male members since 1679, have red hair. I call this an honor.

My brother, C. L. Bentley, was connected with the Coast Artillery for a number of years. My other two brothers have had no connection with the Army, Navy, Militia, nor any military organizations. But they are sure some scrappers. Here are the names and addresses, including information necessary to investigate qualifications:

C. L. Bentley, San Pedro, Cal., age 29 yrs., late of the Coast Artillery of the Pacific Coast. Acquainted with small arms and coast rifles. Acquainted with duties of corporal.

C. D. F. Bentley, Redondo, Cal. Auto driver; seaman. Acquainted with various makes of autos and auto trucks; rules of the sea; general knowledge of the coast of the East and West.

R. B. Bentley, 326 Main St., Long Beach, Cal. Age 27. Acquainted with small-arms; complete knowledge of preserving and processing food products; knowledge of machinery and millwrighting.

L. L. Bentley, San Pedro, Cal. Age 25. Acquainted with the construction and operation of wireless; knowledge of the preserving and processing of food products; knowledge of mill-wrighting and machine installation.—L. L. Bentley, San Pedro, Cal.

BACK ISSUES OF *ADVENTURE*

1913 (12); 1914 (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 12); 1915 complete. Condition as good as new. 10c ea. Carriage extra.—L. P. Peltier, Faribault, Minn.

Complete set from Vol. I to date. $10 net.—C. E. Race, 1441 Steele St., Denver, Colo.

THIS letter, written in December, gives news of several of our number at the front and is also a contribution to the stories of copies of *Adventure* that have had adventures of their own:

December 5, 1915.

Regarding the whereabouts of the boys of Camp-Fire: T. Melville Ross is badly hurt—came down from the clouds too rapidly for comfort. He was occupying a cot in a military hospital in England but expected to be moved elsewhere shortly.

Henry C. Winters was still looking alive and impatiently awaiting the time he could trek to Africa.

The above facts gleaned from letters received from them.

If the Pryce you mean is the one who was at one time in Mexico, I regret to state he has crossed the Divide. He passed in a manner true to a gentleman of his blood. The date and place I do not recall. It was during the battle of the Yser, though, I believe.

MY FIRST copy of *Adventure* was found in a clump of mesquite, coverless, rain-beaten, and half buried in leaves. I had not had a word to read for six months—hence the avidity with which I swung from the saddle to rescue the dog-eared derelict. Needless to state, the eagerness has not diminished for its brothers in sequence.

My "adventures" with "Letter-Friends" are sometimes amusing, but, on the whole, very satisfactory. I have found a number of my old friends and seem to be on the way to make new ones. All of which increases my obligation to you. Sometime perhaps I may be able to square our accounts with mutual glee and satisfaction.—Tod Fuller.

LETTER FRIENDS

Note—This is a service for those of our readers who want some one to write to. For adventurers afield who want a stay-at-home "letter bunkie," and for stay-at-homes, whether ex-adventurers or not, who wish to get into friendly touch with some one who is out "doing things." We publish names and addresses—the rest is up to you, and of course we assume no responsibility of any kind. Women not admitted.

(18) Frank Caldwell, 108 E. 12th St., Austin, Texas.

(19) Henry Lautenschlager, 721 James St., N. S., Pittsburg, Pa.

OUR identification-cards have done service twice this past month. One was carried by a man who had lost his first one "somewhere in the beautiful republic of Honduras," an "ex-flatfoot" who had put in two hitches in the U. S. N. and who, when he wrote in for his second card, wanted to join the American Legion and the Adventurers' Club. That was last August and he wrote from Kansas. The other day a telegram came from an undertaker in Shoshone, Idaho, addressed to the man's serial number in our care:

———— killed here this evening by freight train. Please notify immediately what disposition shall be made of remains.

His name was somewhere on him, but the identification-card furnished the only means of locating his home or friends. We wired them at once.

The second case is set forth in the following letter which was forwarded at once to the address registered with us by the bearer of the card in question. I have not yet heard whether it bore the first news of the casualty or whether more final news had reached his home:

Card number —— was taken from the body of a wounded sergeant after the battle of Ypres. The body was found beside a wrecked motor-car with three saber wounds. I can not tell if this man lived or not, as shortly after I was myself wounded. The card slipped from the body as it was being carried to the dressing-station. I picked it up at the time, but lost track of it until today and discovered it in some papers and am notifying you as per card. Any more information I can give will be gladly given if wanted.—W. C. Dore, Kenora, Canada.

INFORMATION DIRECTORY

IMPORTANT: Only items like those below can be printed—standing sources of information. No room on this page to ask or answer specific questions. Recommend no source of information you are not *sure* of. False information may cause serious loss, even loss of life. *Adventure* does its best to make this directory reliable, but assumes no responsibility therefor.

For data on the Amazon country write Algot Lange, care U. S. Consul, Para, Brazil. Replies only if stamped, addressed envelope is enclosed and only at Mr. Lange's discretion, this service being purely voluntary. (Five cents postage in this case.)

For the Banks fisheries, Frederick William Wallace, editor *Canadian Fisherman*, 35 St. Alexander St., Montreal. Same conditions as above.

For the Philippines and Porto Rico, the Bureau of Insular Affairs, War Dep't, Wash., D. C.

For Alaska, the Alaska Bureau, Chamber of Commerce, Central Bldg., Seattle, Wash.

For Hawaii and Alaska, Dep't of the Interior, Wash., D. C.

For Cuba, Bureau of Information, Dep't of Agri., Com., and Labor, Havana, Cuba.

For Central and South America, John Barrett, Dir. Gen., Pan-American Union, Wash., D. C.

For R. N. W. M. P., Comptroller Royal Northwest Mounted Police, Ottawa, Can., or Commissioner, R. N. W. M. P., Regina, Sask. Only unmarried British subjects, age 22 to 30, above 5 ft. 8 in. and under 175 lbs., accepted.

For Canal Zone, the Panama Canal, Wash., D. C.

For U. S., its possessions and most foreign countries, the Dep't of Com., Wash., D. C.

For Adventurers' Club, get data from this magazine.

For The American Legion, The Secretary, The American Legion, 10 Bridge St., New York.

Mail Address and Forwarding.—This office, assuming no responsibility, will be glad to act as a forwarding address for its readers or to hold mail till called for, provided necessary postage is supplied.

For cabin-boat and small boat travel on the Mississippi and its tributaries, "The Cabin-Boat Primer," by Raymond S. Spears; A. R. Harding, Publisher, Columbus, O., $1.00.

National School Camp Ass'n; address its Sec'y, 1 Broadway, New York.

Red-Headed Regiment, address this magazine.

ONE of the hoards discussed in our series of articles which came to an end in last month's issue, on lost and buried treasures was that on Oak Island, Nova Scotia. Since then I've had an interesting letter from Mr. F. L. Blair, of Calgary, Alberta, which points out mistakes in our account. Mr. Blair sent me also a copy of an extensive and comprehensive article of his on this subject which appeared in the Amherst (Nova Scotia) *Daily News* of February 28, 1912, and which makes extremely interesting reading.

Arthur Sullivant Hoffman

LOST TRAILS

Note.—We offer this department of the "Camp-Fire" free of charge to those of our readers who wish to get in touch again with old friends or acquaintances from whom the years have separated them. For the benefit of the friend you seek, *give your own name if possible.* All inquiries along this line, unless containing contrary instructions, will be considered as intended for publication in full with inquirer's name, in this department, at our discretion. We reserve the right, in case inquirer refuses his name, to substitute any numbers or other names, to reject any item that seems to us unsuitable, and to use our discretion in all matters pertaining to this department. Give also your own full address. We will, however, forward mail through this office, assuming no responsibility therefor. We have arranged with the Montreal *Star* to give additional publication in their "Missing Relative Column," weekly and daily editions, to any of our inquiries for persons last heard of in Canada.

COMRADES belonging to B Co., 7th Inf. from Jan. 15, 1897, to Oct. 27, 1898, please write to George H. Bruckner, Soldiers' and Sailors' Home, Bath, New York, as it is necessary for me to secure data for a pension claim.

DE BRENIL, ARMAND, sailor. Last heard from Sidney, Australia, 1911. Your mother is dead in France, and there is an estate for you. Write your niece, Azeline De Hertoghe Herron, Stratford, Cal.

ETHRIDGE, MRS. CELIA, my wife. Last heard of at 115 Pennsylvania Ave., E. St. Louis, Ill., 1907. Her parents, John E. and Tina Martin. Heard she married again. Should like to locate my only child, Margaret, 10 yrs., if living.—Monroe Ethridge, Box 169, Brownwood, Texas.

PICKENS, OSMER, son, of Independence, Mo. Last heard from New York City, July, 1913. Spoke of going to Charleston, S. C. 19 yrs., 158 lbs., black hair, bluish-gray eyes.—Address Mrs. S. E. Pickens, 309 S. Grand Ave., Independence, Mo.

JOHNSON, JAMES BELTON, or his children, formerly of Huntington, Ind. Last heard of Fairbury and Onarga, Ill. From there went to St. Louis, Mo., 1868. —Address H. F. Johnson, 24 Barker St., Buffalo, N. Y.

BROWN, MARION M., of Portland, Me. Last heard of 1890, shipping as engineer on one of the lines sailing from New York to Rio de Janeiro. Address your old friend, R. A., of 3110 Tenth Ave., N. Y. C., care *Adventure.*

McKAY, RAYMOND, Scotch. Lived Portland, Ore., until 1911, then moved to Salt Lake City, Utah. Rumored he attends St. Edward's College.—Address G. H. Lowthian, Troop H, 12th Cav., Ft. D. A. Russell, Wyo.

CLOUGH, MR. AND MRS. FRANK. Last heard of British Honduras, 1910. May have left there for Arizona or California.—Address Mrs. Marjorie MacGregor Neily, Box 101, Aylesford, N. S.

LONG, JOHN WESLEY, native of Canada. Lived in Chicago; married Miss Carrie Child, and left there 1896. Last heard of in Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada. His daughter inquires for him.—Address Mrs. W. O. Rencher, Madison, Florida.

AVERY, J. F., formerly of Ramseur, N. C., 5 ft. 7 in., 165 lbs., 55 yrs., scar on right side of head. Supposedly in neighborhood of Danielson, Conn.—Address J. W. Hawkins, J. B., U. S. S. *New Hampshire*, Norfolk, Va.

CAIN, G. W. Your letter addressed care your mother, Louisville, Ky., returned unopened, with post-office mark "Left City." Please write, care 181 Carrier Street, Grand Rapids, Mich.

Inquiries will be printed three times. In the January and July issues all unfound back names will be printed again.

HOFFMAN, FRANK L., last heard of Eau Claire, Wisc., 1909, in the lumber business. Home Lancaster, Ohio.—Address Charles D. Hoffman, Lancaster, Ohio.

STARNES, EDWIN G., brother, last heard from in Bay City, Mich. 18 yrs., auburn hair.—Address C. B. Starnes, U. S. Naval Recruiting Sta., Galveston, Texas.

HILIMAN, FRANK, brother, last heard of Winnipeg, Can., 1911. Age 46, 5 ft. 11, light hair, blue eyes, 150 lbs.—Address MRS. MARY SELDERS, 631 8th Ave., Juniata, Blair Co., Pa.

CARROLL, MARTIN, uncle, last heard from in South Chicago, Ill., 5½ ft., brown hair. Born Forford, Mayo Co., Ireland.—J. W. CARROLL, Box 215, Brookfield, Mo.

FLEWELLING, ERNEST, last heard of Jackson, Mich. Alice remarried. Write mother and father.—644 Wabasha St., St. Paul, Minn. Canadian papers please copy.

LOGUE, DAN, left St. Paul, Minn., 1910, and joined the navy. Supposedly on the *New York* when at Vera Cruz, Mexico.—Address THOMAS LOGUE, 22 N. Main St., Butte, Mont.

AMMANN, JOSEPH, last heard of Grand Island, Nebr., Feb., 1909. 22 yrs. 5 ft. 9 in., 140 lbs., brown hair.—Address CHRIS AMMANN, 134 Peshine Ave., Newark, N. J.

HINES, RALPH, or "Shorty" Hines, last heard of Whitehall, Mont., 1909. Important news.—Address HARRY F. WYKLE, 14 Melville Place, Woodhaven, N. Y.

CUMERY, BESSIE, sister, Radford, Nottingham, England, February, 1876.—Address WILLIAM ISAACS, Gen. Del., Honolulu, Hawaii.

Please notify us at once when you have found your man.

HAMPTON, PAUL, left you in Birmingham, Ala., March, 1913. Please write me, WM. O. T., Box 113, Guyton, Ga.

VINAY, JULIUS, of Valdez, last heard from U. S. S. *Crocus*, Buffalo, N. Y.—Address L. T. 307.

RANDOLPH H. ATKIN, Lawrence Stewart, S. N. Morgan, Christian A. Damm, please send us your present addresses. Mail sent to you at addresses given us doesn't reach you.—Address A. S. HOFFMAN, care *Adventure.*

NUMBERS 56, 68, 73, 76, W 93, W 167, W 140, W 150, W 153, W 183, W 184, W 189, W 195, W 203, W 211, W 212, W 215, W 231, W 250, C 189, C 205, L. T. 207, L. T. 284, C 293. Please send us your present addresses. Letters forwarded to you at addresses given us do not reach you.—Address A. S. HOFFMAN, care *Adventure.*

THE following have been inquired for in full in either the January or February issues of *Adventure.* They can get name of inquirer from this office:

ASH, CAPT. GEORGE, Missoula, Mont.; Ashenfelter, Loyd E.; Anderson, Joe, discharged U. S. A. Hospital Corps, Manila, P. I., 1901; Anderson, William or "Bill," Ft. Wayne, Ind.; Aniba, or Kennedy, Alfred; Basye, Thomas T.; Benson, George D., Philippines, 1899; Bly, Royal R., Spokane, Wash., 1909; Butts, or Olstrom, Godfrey; Bishop, Angus (Jack); Bishop, Charles; Burnett, Alice; Costelloe, Jack, Australian, hiked with Ed Bushby; Cuff, Mart, Panama, 1912-13; Denson, John; Downer, Simon (Tom); Downer, Vearne; Dyer, Michael; Fallett, Bob; Finley, Sam; Fisher, Joseph, Great Falls, Mont.; Frain, James, St. Louis, 1875, deaf mute; Frain, Roderick, Cripple Creek, Colo.; Freeman, Al; Gardner, Frank; Garnache, William J.; J. P. C.; King, Frank M., Paris, Texas; Knight, Joe (Cop); Lambert, H. L.; McKeever, John A.; Marlock, Dan (Shorty); Mason, Joseph Ernest; Moore, J. A. (Jack), Tremedoc, N. Wales, Eng.; Niell, H. (Nielson); Pearson, Walter; Randall, W. S.; Rogers, George John; Ryan, Wm., Australian, hiked with Ed Bushby; Semple, James T.; Seton, Capt. Robert Arthur; Sheern, Thomas Eugene; Sparhawk, Harvey and Emma; Standbaugh, Lester; Stephens, Will, Ottawa, Ont., Can.; Stevens, Claude; Swarm, E. A.; Thompson, Jim F. ("Cyclone Beachnut Jimmy"); Thomas, Willis I.; Tippit, W. A. (Arthur); Walton, Jack; Watson, Louis, Black Mt., N. C.; Wheeler, Joseph Harry; Zappert, Walter.

MISCELLANEOUS—Boys of Troop 9, 13th U. S. Cav., 1908-11. Also those in Parhm & Dean Lumber Camp, N. Brownville, Me., Winter of 1913; Courish, Andrew, Dona Ana, N. M., 1898. Also Mike Grace, somewhere Rocky Mts., 1900, and Frank Whelan, California, 1913.

THE TRAIL AHEAD

In addition to those stories mentioned on page two, the following are scheduled for the April issue of *Adventure*, which will be in your hands March third:

THE TRAP ***William West***
A complete novelette of the prize-ring. There's a punch in every page.

THE RELOCATION OF MONTANA CREEK ***Samuel Alexander White***
Sark and *Bassett* get into the thick of a thrilling race for gold in the Northwest.

THE WAR-BRIDE ***John A. Heffernan***
A "dark horse" overturns Wall Street, and plungers go the limit with startling results.

THE COURAGE OF MR. CADY ***Ross Ellis***
A powerful character story of a little man in a big business, a man who hadn't even the nerve to propose marriage.

PARADISE BEND ***William Patterson White***
You've begun this great Western serial. We hardly need say, "next month's instalment is a cyclone of action."

WANTED —MEN

NOTE.—We offer this corner of the "Camp-Fire" free of charge to our readers. Naturally we can not vouch for any of the letters, the writers thereof, or any of the claims set forth therein, beyond the fact that we receive and publish these letters in good faith. We reserve the privilege of not publishing any letters or parts of a letter. Any inquiry for men sent to this magazine will be considered as intended for publication, at our discretion, in this department, with all names and addresses given therein printed in full, unless such inquiry contains contrary instructions. In the latter case we reserve the right to substitute for real names any numbers or other names. We are ready to forward mail through this office, but assume no responsibility therefor. **N.B.—Items asking for money rather than men will not be published.**

Inquiries for opportunities instead of men are NOT printed in this department.

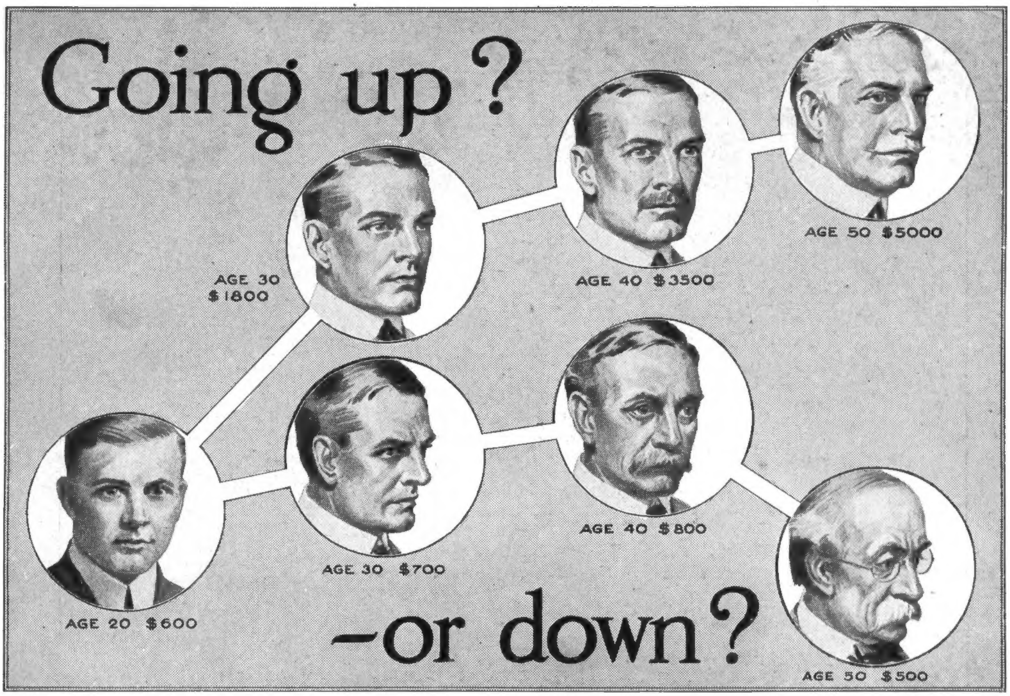
YOUNG man about 24, to go on road, taking photographs to cover expenses, and ultimately head for Cuba and South America. Must have at least $50.00 for his share of expenses, and necessary outfit. Everything "fifty-fifty." Prefer some one who has no home ties, and is not afraid to rough it. Knowledge of photography not necessary. Enclose stamped addressed envelope.—Address W 308.

PARTNER, not over 25 yrs., to take a trip with me through Central America in Spring, to get hold of some real estate. Must speak some Spanish and pay own expenses. Give full account of yourself in first letter.—Address ENRIQUE ROSS, 1313 W. Indiana Ave., Spokane, Wash.

YOUNG man, fond of adventure, to do exploring off Florida coast. Must be single and willing to drop from sight for about three months. Will have to pay share of expenses. Good proposition for honest man.—Address W 309.

YOUNG man to accompany me on walking trip through Central America, to start in the Spring or sooner. Will furnish free railroad pass for both of us as far as New Orleans, La. Partner to meet his share of expenses after that.—Address JACK THOMPSON, Box 104, Ravenna, Nebr.

YOUNG man, 20 to 25: to go on prospecting trip to Southern California. I have description of dry placer given me by Will Bartan, who was killed in Nicaragua insurrection, 1913. Must pay share of expenses and be good character; no booze-fighter wanted.—Address REBEL ROGERS, R. R. No. 13, Box 2, Pineville, La.



HERE is your future charted for you, based on the actual average earnings of trained and untrained men.

Which way will you go? You'll either go *up*, through *training*, to a position that means good money and more comforts as the years go by, or you'll go *down*, through *lack* of training, into the ranks of the poorly paid.

It rests entirely with you which way you go. You can make or break your own future. And *now* is the time to decide. Not next year, not next month, but *now*. You *can* go up if you want to. You can *get* the training that will command a trained man's salary. The International Correspondence Schools have helped hundreds of thousands of men to qualify for advancement. Let them show *you* how *you* can prepare yourself, in your own home, for the position you want in the work you like best.

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☐ Electric Car Running
☐ Electric Wiring
☐ Telephone Expert
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☐ Mechanical Draftsman
☐ Machine Shop Practice
☐ Gas Engineer
☐ CIVIL ENGINEER
☐ Surveying and Mapping
☐ MINE FOREMAN OR ENGINEER
☐ Metallurgist or Prospector
☐ STATIONARY ENGINEER
☐ Marine Engineer
☐ ARCHITECT
☐ Contractor and Builder
☐ Architectural Draftsman
☐ Concrete Builder
☐ Structural Engineer
☐ PLUMBING AND HEATING
☐ Sheet Metal Worker
☐ SALESMANSHIP
☐ ADVERTISING MAN
☐ Window Trimmer
☐ Show Card Writer
☐ Outdoor Sign Painter
☐ ILLUSTRATOR
☐ DESIGNER
☐ BOOKKEEPER
☐ Stenographer and Typist
☐ Cert. Public Accountant
☐ Railway Accountant
☐ Commercial Law
☐ GOOD ENGLISH
☐ Teacher
☐ Common School Subjects
☐ CIVIL SERVICE
☐ Railway Mail Clerk
☐ AGRICULTURE
☐ POULTRY RAISING
☐ Textile Overseer or Supt.
☐ Navigator
☐ Chemist
☐ AUTO RUNNING
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THE RIDGWAY COMPANY,
Spring and Macdougal Sts., New York City.

Gentlemen: I can take the time, have the ability and acquaintance, and want the money. I would like to know more about this proposition. Enclosed are the names of two references.

Name...

Street and No...

City..............................State......................